WHAT IF
you FALL for
ME FIRST?
G.F. MILLER

Praise for

Not If You Break Up with Me First

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—*Shelf Awareness*, starred review

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"Funny and real."
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WHAT IF you FALL for ME FIRST?

G.F. MILLER

ALADDIN
NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI

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To the seventh graders.
I promise it gets better.

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Chapter 1
How to Never Get Noticed by Your Crush

Nobody washes their coats. That's something you don't think about until you're half buried in a mountain of crusty, musty outerwear at a junior high glow party. At least, Sofia hadn't.

If she'd known what was about to happen—or, frankly, how bad two hundred coats smelled—she would have gone all the way outside. But, of course, she didn't know. So there she was, huddled behind Coat Mountain, praying that she wouldn't humiliate herself in front of the one person she loved most in the world.

To be honest, Sofia had been hiding behind coats—metaphorically speaking—ever since Mark Chen had asked her to be his partner for the slime lab in science last year. (Seriously, any teacher who just waves their hand and says, "Partner up," has *no idea* what it's like to be an introvert in middle school. Those are panic-inducing words.) But Mark had swooped in and saved her. And he'd been funny and nice and good at science, and Sofia was smitten.

Ten months. That's how long Sofia had been living off the breadcrumbs of Mark's attention, dreaming that he would notice her again, and spending all day every day trying not to ruin her chances with him by publicly embarrassing herself.

Her streak lasted up to about five minutes ago. The drumline was performing in the gym at Glow Night—their white drums glowing under the black light, their faces and hair painted neon colors. There were glow sticks, glow paint, and glowing decorations. There was even a strobe light. The whole school was having the best party ever.

Sofia had come with her friends from Cross Country—Destiny, Nina, and Eve. Almost as soon as they'd gotten here, she'd seen Mark batting a glowing

balloon around with his basketball friends. And he looked *right at her*. Which should have been great. Except he made this exaggerated sad-clown face, and she'd instantly started worrying about him and mouthed, "Are you okay," with some improvised sign language that probably looked more like miming, and then he'd cracked up and pointed at her shirt.

She'd forgotten she had painted a gosh-awful neon frowny face on her shirt (long story). The point is, Mark was laughing at her, and she deserved it because she'd been being at least three kinds of cringe. So she'd grabbed all her friends' coats as an excuse and run away.

No. To be honest, she hadn't run. She'd scampered. Scampering was running's embarrassingly girlie and mousey little cousin.

While Sofia subjected herself to a moment-by-moment mental replay of her failures, one of the drummers was hyping up the crowd between cadences. Everyone except Sofia screamed and stomped their excitement. Why couldn't she be like them? Cool and happy and fun and not at all hiding in a giant pile of dirty laundry?

A brief burst of cold air touched her hot face—someone must have opened the gym door—and snapped her out of her pity party. Her friends were probably wondering where she was, and surely Mark had moved away by now. Determined not to miss the most exciting event of her life so far, she stood.

And came face-to-face with Mark, just a coat pile away.

She froze as her eyes locked on his, the whites glowing in the black light. Her heart pounded and her mouth went dry, and she just knew that if he talked to her, she would turn beet red and say something incoherent and then pass out. She needed to find the perfect time to talk to Mark, when she could act casual and laugh breezily while she flipped her hair. Like Ashlyn was doing right now as she walked toward them.

Ashlyn. She was a beautiful, confident, tall blond volleyball player. If you searched up "fierce girl," the first twenty hits would be pictures of Ashlyn. Of course Mark looked right past Sofia to gaze at her. Sofia couldn't blame him at all. But, seriously, she would give just about anything—including nonvital organs—to trade places with Ashlyn.

For reasons Sofia had missed in her Mark-induced meditative state, the crowd went, "Ooooooooooh." It felt like everyone in the room knew how pathetic her inner monologue was.

There was the sound of a single drumstick hitting a rim—*tink, tink, tink, tink*—and the drumline launched into a new, earsplitting cadence. From behind the coats, Sofia watched enviously as Ashleyn challenged Mark to a thumb war. Mark won, and Ashlyn wrenched her hand out of his grip and punched him in the arm, laughing.

Then Ashlyn said something in Mark's ear that made his lips part over glowing white teeth. He'd gotten his braces off eighteen days ago, and his smile was absolutely perfect. He brushed his glossy, chin-length black hair away from his face and leaned in to say something. As he spoke—his words swallowed by the deafening drumming—Ashlyn shifted closer to him, so close that Sofia was almost positive his lips brushed Ashlyn's earlobe.

She couldn't take it anymore. While Mark was completely absorbed in the blond goddess, Sofia escaped out the door, unnoticed.

It was early November in Illinois, and the night was dark and chilly. With a primal noise born of ten months of longing and frustration, Sofia kicked the rough brick wall before letting herself slide to her butt on the cold pavement. Then she tore the glow bracelet off her wrist and threw it as far away from her as she could. Out here, she didn't have to try to glow along with everyone else. She could disappear into the dark—if it was even possible to get more invisible.

"Hi?" came a guy's voice from above her.

It turned out that someone *could* see Sofia. Just the worst possible person.

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Chapter 2
The Worst Person, Reporting for Duty

While Glow Night ramped up inside, Holden had been outside doing a dry run before going live on his feed. He took each of his posts very seriously—it was his image on the line, after all. You never know which picture or video will be the one that pushes you over two thousand followers or, for that matter, goes viral. So you have to treat every post like the Big One.

Which is why, after making the rounds inside to get a feel for the room and see who looked postworthy, Holden had come back out here to practice and prepare. First, he'd made sure he was standing with his shoulders back and his head tilted a little to the side—like his favorite influencer, Igo Big, always did. Then he'd checked his teeth in the selfie cam and finger combed his hair so that it was sticking out in just the right places. Out here, with nothing but one streetlight, the highlights in his dark blond waves were barely noticeable. He hoped they'd pop under the black light.

By starting the video out here, his followers would actually be able to hear what he was saying. Plus, there would be that Dorothy-opening-the-door-to-Oz effect when he transitioned from natural light to black light. He'd do a quick, hyped intro. Something like, *Let's check out this epic Glow Party!* Then he'd flip the camera and do an action-cam shot of walking in. He'd pan the room and—

A girl in a pink puffy coat slammed through the door, made a noise like an angry bunny, kicked the building, and flopped to the concrete. Angrily, she tore a glow bracelet off her wrist and whipped it at the stately LINCOLN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL sign. Then she dropped her face onto her knees and started making sniffling and whimpering noises.

"Hi?" Holden said, since she clearly hadn't noticed him standing right there while she had her meltdown.

Her head popped up and she looked him over, her face visibly registering disappointment and suspicion. Which was hurtful, honestly.

He recognized her. Sofia Santini. She ran Cross Country and acted shy around guys. She also consistently wore clothes that looked straight out of the girls-age-four-to-eight department at JCPenney. It was a very specific style choice. But one thing you could say for Sofia was that she was always smiling, cheering on other people, and just in general being nice. She was like a human Care Bear. He'd never seen her fully freaking out before. It was troubling.

Inside, the drumline's cadence came to a messy end—the musical equivalent of a five-car pileup. Holden realized that between meltdown girl out here and whatever was happening in there, he wouldn't be going live any time soon. Resigning himself to the missed opportunity, he slid his phone into his back pocket as he said, "Why are you out here crying?"

"I'm not crying," Sofia insisted, as tears ran down her cheeks. She swiped at them and turned her face away. "Please don't."

Holden hadn't moved or done anything since Sofia had landed in his production space. "Don't what?" he asked, genuinely at a loss.

"Don't say anything. Just go away. *Please*," Sofia begged, dragging her sleeve across her wet face. Unfortunately, her jacket was water resistant, so all it did was smear the tears around. "I just really want to be alone right now."

Holden was no child psychologist, but he had spent more than his share of time in the family therapist's office. He could recognize a cry for help when he saw one. Sofia didn't look at all like a girl who should be left alone. So—even though he was probably the worst person for the job, and he didn't know her at all, and she had temporarily derailed his social-media career—Holden figured it was up to him to cheer her up.

Luckily, talking to girls was kind of his superpower.

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Chapter 3
Why Is He Still Talking?

"Well, it's a public sidewalk, and I was here first" was Holden's smirking response to her heartfelt plea for solitude. The thing was, she'd lied. She didn't want to be alone. She actually hated being alone. She just didn't want to be with *him*.

Holden was the very last person she would have chosen to see her freaking out. He was way too publicly into himself, and he had a reputation for being a player. Plus, her friend Destiny told her almost daily, in very colorful language, how untrustworthy Holden was. Most of it Sofia couldn't repeat, not even inside her own head. Destiny had a real way with words.

On the other hand, Sofia's mom always said not to judge too harshly because you never know what people are going through. But it was hard not to judge him when he was standing over her, smugly refusing to give her space and posing like a pick-me boy.

That was too mean. Sofia felt guilty for thinking it.

She gave a reproachful look—partly directed at him but mostly aimed at herself. In response, he shrugged casually while also flexing his shoulders. She could tell he was flexing because he had on one of those tight athletic pullovers that cost like a hundred dollars. It was the kind of thing a guy would wear hoping to get ogled.

Sofia startled herself by laughing—one surprised "ha" that broke through her misery.

"What?" Holden said, still posing.

"You… um… nothing." Did he really not know how silly he looked when he flexed like that? Sofia wiped her face again. At least she didn't feel like bawling anymore. But she still wished Holden weren't there.

Someone was shouting in the gym. Sofia recognized Eve's voice, then Andrew's. Looking intrigued, Holden walked to the doors and looked in. Even in the dim glow of the school's parking lot lights, she could see his face register surprise and then amusement.

"What's going on in there?" Sofia asked, curiosity overcoming her general distrust of Holden.

"Ummm... Eve McNeil is going apeshhh—" Holden glanced at her before finishing with, "Shoes."

"Ape shoes?" Sofia hoped he could see the skeptical face she was making. She obviously knew that wasn't what he had been about to say. It was embarrassing that he changed it for her—like she was a little kid or something.

He shrugged. And flexed. Weirdo.

Eve was one of her good friends from the Cross Country team. But she'd been going through some really rough drama with Andrew. They used to be besties, and then they started dating, and then it turned out that Andrew liked somebody else, or maybe that was just a rumor. Sofia wasn't clear on the details, but she knew Eve was struggling. Now Sofia was genuinely worried that Eve might be doing something... impulsive. "Is she okay?" Sofia asked.

"She's fine," Holden assured her. "Glow paint is nontoxic, right?" The look on his face could only be described as FOMO.

Sofia offered, "You should go in." But for some reason, Holden leaving her alone with her self-pity felt less appealing than it had just a minute ago. She figured that watching him flex and pose was a good distraction.

No. That wasn't the real reason. It was actually nice to have someone to talk to, even if that person had a bad reputation and was acting kind of weird.

Holden turned away from the little window, patting his phone like it was a fussy baby, and said, "It would be pretty crappy to leave you crying in the dark."

Sofia stood. "Wow, that's chivalrous."

"Why do you sound surprised?" Holden clutched his chest, as if she'd stabbed him.

"I'm sorry," Sofia said. She honestly hadn't meant to hurt his feelings. "It's just... different. For you."

"Ouch, girl. Ice cold."

"I'm not trying to be mean!" She chose her next words carefully so he wouldn't have anything to get offended about. "You're just usually kind of, I don't know—" The word "misogynistic" came to her mind, but her mom was constantly reminding her to be kind, and she wasn't completely sure what the word meant, so she said, "Flirty."

Holden fake coughed as if her statement was physically choking him. "I would *never* flirt with you. You're like somebody's kid sister. So sweet and innocent."

Sofia exhaled heavily. That *right there* was her problem.

"Are you going to start crying again?" Holden sounded honestly concerned.

"It's fine. It's just..." Sofia shook her head. "Never mind."

"What? Seriously."

Just then, the gym doors burst open, almost knocking her over. As she stumbled forward, Holden reached out a hand and caught her by the arm. Two people emerged dripping neon orange and pink paint, belly laughing and clutching at each other. It was Mark and Ashlyn. It would take more than a few gallons of glow paint to keep Sofia from recognizing the most beautiful boy in the school and the fierce girl who had him by the arm.

The self-preservation instinct took over. Sofia gripped Holden and yanked hard, positioning him between her and Mark. Holden hopped a couple of times to maintain his balance, but he didn't call her out. He turned, letting her hide behind him.

"Hey, Chen. Hey, Ashlyn. Sup?" Holden greeted them in a smooth internet-influencer voice. Sofia, huddling behind him, clutching the back of his spendy shirt, forced herself to take a centering breath. Why the heck did he smell so good?

"Sup, Holdo," Mark said.

Ashlyn fist-bumped Holden, exclaiming, "You're missing it. It's a freak show in there. Paint *everywhere*. The chaperones have zero control."

Holden chuckled lightly. "Guess that's why nobody's sweeping the parking lot."

"Ha. Yeah," Ashlyn agreed. She gave Mark a shove toward the multipurpose field. "Let's go, Marky Mark."

Sofia thought Mark's "Uh, see ya" held a hint of worry. Like he was being carted off by Ashlyn against his will.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" Holden called after them.

Over his shoulder, Sofia watched them trip away, her brain screaming, *Why her?! Why not me?!* With a groan, she slumped to the ground and put her head on her knees.

Holden sat down next to her. "Now you *have* to tell me what's going on."

Sofia put her arms over her head, full tornado-drill style.

"Come on. You can trust me. I won't tell anybody."

For reasons already discussed, Holden was the last person she should confess her secrets to. She shook her head, letting it rock against her knees.

He nudged her with his elbow. "Did something happen with Ashlyn?"

Sofia shook her head again.

"With Mark?"

Still resting her cheek on her knee, Sofia shifted to hug her legs. Holden arched an eyebrow at her, like, *Well? Are you going to talk to me?*

She sighed. "Can I ask you a weird question?"

Holden blew his lips out and shrugged.

"Does that mean yes?"

"It means 'I guess we're changing the subject.'"

Sofia decided to take that as a yes and asked, "What would make me fierce?"

Holden choked and coughed into his fist. "Girl."

"I'm serious. Why aren't I fierce?"

"You *really* want to go there?" Holden demanded.

"I need to know," Sofia insisted. "Be honest. I promise I won't get upset." She took a calming breath and straightened up, ready to take whatever he hit her with.

"Oooookay." Holden hopped to his feet and surveyed her, leaning on the wall with his arms crossed, looking too cool to be talking to her. "You give a fifth-grade vibe."

Sofia set her jaw. "Why, though?"

"Well—there's the pink puffy coat and the cutesy sweaters you always wear." Holden's voice was matter of fact. There was no hint of scoffing.

Sofia nodded, thankful that he wasn't making fun of her.

Her grandma bought most of her clothes, and her taste ran toward hearts, kittens, and teddy bears. Because she loved her grandma (and she couldn't afford to be picky), Sofia had trained herself to be happy with whatever she got. Or, if not happy, at least grateful.

Determined to hear all her shortcomings, no matter how painful it was, she pressed, "What else?"

Holden surveyed her. "The little hair clips are giving 'elementary school.' And, I don't know, just the way you talk and stuff. You never swear. You never burn anybody. You're too nice."

Sofia blamed her mom for that. Ever since she could remember, her mom had been drilling it into her to "speak life." In fact, she couldn't even leave the house without her mom touching her forehead and saying, "Be grateful. Be kind." It was a mantra.

But if getting rid of her barrettes and saying a few bad words would make her fierce so Mark would like her, that would be okay, right?

She stood, yanking the clip out of her hair. Some of the long straight strands immediately fell forward, tickling her nose and obscuring her vision. "Better?"

Holden took a step back and put his hands up like she might attack him. "No offense, but are you trying to get me to like you? Cuz—"

"No! Gross!" Sofia realized how mean that was and blurted, "Sorry!"

Holden was starting to look at her like she was unhinged. And maybe she was, because she was on the verge of letting *Holden Thomas* into her circle of trust. The thing is, he'd been chivalrous and a good listener. He did have this hard-to-swallow cool-guy act, but at the same time he seemed way nicer than she'd expected. Maybe her mom was right about not judging. Besides, as of now, her chances with Mark were definitely hovering around zero. What did she have to lose?

She swept her hair out of her face and blurted, "It's *Mark*. I want Mark Chen to like me."

Holden looked in the direction Mark had walked off in, then back at her. "Girl, if you want to get his attention, why were you hiding from him just now?"

Sofia put her head in her hands.

"Come on," Holden pressed. "*I* answered *your* question."

"Fine." Sofia forced herself to lower her hands, but she couldn't look at Holden's face as she confessed. "I've had a huge crush on Mark forever. But he doesn't even know I exist. Or maybe he does, but he doesn't think of me as... anything. I came out here because he and Ashlyn were flirting right in front of me."

"Okay. Whoa." Holden held his hands up to stop her.

But now that she'd started pouring her heart out, it was hard to stop the flow. She kept going. "I was *right there*, and he didn't even notice me. It was so awkward and just... demoralizing."

"So you cried and hid?" Holden slowly shook his head. "No offense, but that's dumb."

"What am I supposed to do?!" It came out too high, too whiny. She hated when her voice did that.

Holden shrugged. "Go bigger. Make a scene."

Sofia hung her head. "I can't do that."

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Chapter 4
She's Like the Kid Sister I Always Didn't Want

Sofia stared at the pavement, looking like she was for sure going to start crying again. So much for the whole "be honest, I can take it" thing. Holden shifted his weight, thinking he was going to have to come up with some way to fill the awkward silence, when her phone took care of the situation.

Ding. Ding-ding. Ding.

She dug the phone out of her coat pocket while it continued dinging. Her puffy pink jacket really did look like something a ten-year-old would wear. As she checked the messages, her face registered shock.

"What?" Holden asked, trying to get a look at the screen.

"A bunch of people are in Principal Oosterbeek's office. I guess they're in big trouble for trashing Glow Night."

"Seriously? Who got busted?"

Sofia's voice was heavy with worry. "Eve, Destiny, Nina… like everybody." She tapped a reply, simultaneously saying it out loud. "I'm. So. Sorry. That's horrible. Is there. Anything. I. Can. Do?"

Holden tried to think of who would worry about him if he got hauled into the principal's office. Nobody came to mind. Mostly to deflect those thoughts, he pointed out, "You gotta stop texting out loud. It's dorky as sh—" He caught himself just in time to finish the word, "shoot."

Sofia went red and stuffed the phone back into her jacket pocket. She mumbled, "Sorry, bad habit."

He rolled his eyes, annoyed at her for being too nice.

Then they stood not looking at each other for an awkward half-minute.

Finally Sofia said, "Well, I guess I'd better go."

"Where?"

"Home, obviously."

"Who's picking you up?"

"Well, Destiny was my ride. So." Sofia shrugged. "I guess I'm walking."

But she didn't move. She looked out into the dark, and Holden thought she looked nervous or... hesitant. Just like when he'd first seen her crying in the dark, Holden didn't feel right about leaving her on her own. There were a lot of streetlights in the neighborhoods around the school, so really, she *would* be fine. But he didn't want to go back to his house anyway, and this party had clearly worn itself out. So he said, "I'll walk you home."

"You don't have to do that. It's only a few blocks," Sofia said, but her voice sounded a little thin.

"It's dark. I want to." He didn't want to seem like too much of a softy, so he added, "Besides, I've got nothing better to do."

"You could go home."

"Nah."

With a little laugh, Sofia said, "You're being chivalrous again."

"Yeah. What can I say? I'm that guy," Holden said as they stepped off the curb. "Promise not to fall for me."

"Huh?" She gaped at him for a second and then started walking faster.

He grinned. "I've got major pull. I can't help it. But, seriously, I'm not into you."

Sofia gasped. "I literally— I, I *just* told you I like somebody else!"

She was so flustered that Holden cracked up.

She slapped both of her hands onto her cheeks. "You're teasing me."

"Duh." Holden had the impulse to give her a shove. That's what he would have done if he were flirting with her. He kept his hands to himself.

They crossed the parking lot in silence. Then, as they started down a neighborhood street, Sofia said, "My mom would have picked me up, but she has to get up really early, so I didn't want to wake her up now. I like walking anyway."

It seemed like Sofia thought she had to defend her mom. He wanted to ask, *Why do you care?* On so many levels. But instead he said, "Why does she get up so early?"

"She teaches a sunrise yoga class on the weekends."

"Oh. Kay." Holden filed that information under Reason's Sofia Is Weirdly Nice: crunchy granola hippie mom. Then he decided to change the subject to anything besides parents by asking, "So, why Mark?"

Holden knew Mark from basketball, but he'd never thought much about him beyond his free throw average. He seemed decent—on the court and in general.

After a pause, Sofia said, "Promise you won't make fun of me."

He turned toward her and pretended to zip his lip.

Sofia sighed. "We were lab partners last year for the slime lab. The teacher told us to pick partners, and I was scared I'd be alone, and then Mark *picked me*. It was so sweet. He's such a nice guy, and funny and smart. And so, *so* pretty."

"Don't call guys 'pretty.' It's weird."

"Well, he's got good bone structure and nice eyebrows and beautiful hair. So he *is* pretty."

"So shallow," Holden teased.

"You said you wouldn't make fun of me!"

He hadn't said that. He had nonverbally *implied* that. Not his fault she couldn't take the tiniest amount of teasing. Helping her get a thicker skin was probably the kindest thing he could do. He brushed his fingers over his eyebrows and down his jaw. "How about me? Am I *pretty*?"

Sofia walked forward, pointedly silent.

"Ouch," Holden said. "Ice cold, girl." It was a good thing Holden was confident about his looks. Otherwise, that silence would have cut deep.

Sofia chewed her lip. "Sorry. I mean, I'm not trying to be rude. It's just, whatever I say, you'll take it the wrong way."

"What if I promise not to take it any kind of way?" Holden nudged her with his elbow. "Come on. Please?"

Sofia sighed again. "Fine. You look like someone who would have your own YouTube channel where you try out hair products and do style tutorials."

Holden was honestly flattered. He bit his lip and pretended to toss his hair. "Stop being obsessed with me."

"You promised not to take it the wrong way!" Sofia accused in the loudest voice he'd ever heard her use. It felt like victory to get a rise out of her. Like with

a kid sister.

He grinned in the dark. "I didn't promise that."

"You did too!"

"I asked, 'What *if* I promise.' Not my fault you made assumptions."

Sofia stopped walking and gaped at him. "Holden, this is why people don't trust you."

By "people" he figured she meant "people he'd dated." And, yeah, a few of their friends. He'd decided about three girlfriends ago not to care what exes thought about him. Holden had a ton of friends from basketball, band, and especially online—including plenty of girls with no trust issues. But it still stung a little. He covered with a cool expression he'd been practicing in the mirror and said, "Sofia, if someone gives you crap, just give it right back. Don't make it serious."

Sofia looked thoughtful for a moment before walking on. Holden kept pace with her, figuring she was ticked at him. But eventually she said, "I don't know how to flirt like that."

"No shhhoot," Holden scoffed.

Sofia stopped in front of a little box of a house that looked like a good candidate for one of those home-makeover shows. They'd built a bunch of these tiny bungalows around here during the housing shortage when all the soldiers came back from World War II. Holden kept that nerdy piece of knowledge hidden deep down where no one would ever, *ever* find it.

"This is me," she said. "Thanks for walking with me. It was... interesting."

"Okay," Holden said, sliding his hands into his back pockets in a way that—according to Igo Big—would make his shoulders look jacked. "See ya at school."

"See ya." Sofia smiled at him—a really cute, nose-crinkling smile. Not datable-girl cute. Little-kid cute.

They both said "bye" one more time, and then Holden had to walk all the way back to the school to get his bike to ride just as far in the other direction. By the time he got past the neighborhood gate and to his house, it was almost eleven. He left his bike in the garage, let himself in, and disarmed the alarm. Inside, the house was dark and silent.

He felt his way to the wide curved stairs, found the light switch, and went up. At the top, he could hear his mom and stepdad talking in their room. It was muffled by the heavy double doors leading to the master suite, but he could hear his mom saying,"...calling it a high-risk pregnancy because of 'advanced maternal age.' So now I'm worried about the baby *and* feeling old."

She sounded really fragile, like one more tragedy would break her. Holden's arms itched to hug her, a ghost of a long-unused muscle memory.

His stepdad said, "Try not to worry about it."

"Really, Trevor?" Mom switched to full sarcasm in under half a second. "Wow. That was *so* helpful. Why didn't I think of that? Yeah, I'll just do *that*."

Trevor obviously needed a clean getaway. To help him out, Holden called, "I'm home."

The conversation went silent. After a few beats, his mom opened her bedroom door enough to poke her head out. Her hair was still in artful waves, but she'd washed her makeup off, and the dark circles under her eyes made her look exhausted and sick. She surveyed him like he was a salesman that had ignored the no-soliciting sign.

Finally, she said, "You're back late. Have fun?"

Holden could tell she didn't want any kind of real answer, so all he said was, "Yeah."

They looked at each other for another second, and then Mom said, "Okay, well, don't leave the light on."

Her door clicked shut.

Whatever, Holden told himself bitterly. *Same old cutscene.*

Holden suddenly remembered he hadn't checked his feeds since he'd found Sofia outside the school. He got the phone out, snapped off the light switch, and let the soft glow from his screen guide him to his bedroom.

Even though he hadn't gotten a chance to go live tonight, his latest selfie had 285 likes. Not a personal best, but it still felt good. He responded to the comments and checked his followers—still 1,791. Then he ended up scrolling. His classmates had posted a bunch of Glow Night stuff—first chaotic energy pics and then videos of the big brawl from every angle, some in slo-mo, looping, or sped up. After scrolling through about twenty of those, he came upon Igo Big

looking incredibly cool and saying: “Show me your glow up, Biggies! Tag me on your glow-up pics. If I’m blown away, I’ll boost you!”

What would a boost from Igo Big be worth? Hundreds of new followers? Thousands? Just being noticed by him at all would be amazing. It only took Holden a few clicks to make a side by side of himself in sixth grade and now. He posted it and tagged Igo Big. Then he fell asleep pondering the possibilities.

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Chapter 5
What Time Is It? Glow-Up Time.

Sofia woke up way too early to the sound of someone pounding on drums outside. She stuffed her pillow over her head and tried to go back to sleep. But then she remembered that it was Saturday and her mom had to work all day, and she started dreading being alone in an empty house. Dread can wake you up faster than coffee. Giving up on sleep, she got up, got dressed, and asked her mom if she could tag along to work.

Even though she hadn't been to yoga in years, it felt familiar. Her mom led them through lots of poses in a soft, soothing voice. Sofia did fall over while trying to hold the tree pose. She also dozed off on her mat during a meditation and may have been snoring. But the other yogis politely pretended not to notice, and they all said "namaste" to her as they left. Except one guy with a beard, who asked her mom, "Is this your little girl?"

Sofia wanted to scream, "I'm not a *little girl*!" First Holden and now this guy —seriously?!

Instead of screaming, she settled for rolling her eyes, which for some reason made the guy chuckle as he left.

"Sofia," her mom said, calm and gentle but reproving, "please don't roll your eyes. We don't want to bring negative energy into this sacred space."

Sofia turned away so her mom couldn't see her roll her eyes even harder. Then she and her negative energy exited the studio.

Unfortunately, her mom had another class before her first break, so Sofia had to wait the rest of the morning in the "welcome space" (aka the lobby). She'd brought her homework, a library book, and her phone to help pass the time.

She pulled up her Cross Country friends group chat and texted.

Good morning ☀

Eve r u ok?

How is EVERYONE??

Is anyone even up yet??

"Sofia!" A woman named Solaria greeted her from the welcome desk. She had full sleeve tattoos on both arms, multiple facial piercings, and a buzz cut. Sofia had known her ever since she could remember—at least seven or eight years. She was nice.

Sofia stifled a yawn. "Hi, Solaria."

"I haven't seen you in so long!" She stepped around the desk as if to get a better view of her. "Look at you! Are you ten now? Or eleven?"

It took incredible self-control to say (and not scream), "I'm almost fourteen, actually."

"NO! You can't be!" Solaria looked genuinely shocked, which really was the last straw.

ENOUGH! Sofia thought desperately. *I can't keep doing this.*

She thought of Holden saying she was like somebody's kid sister.

Of Mark looking right through her.

Of Ashlyn—tall and blond and beautiful. There was no way anyone ever accused her of being ten. *Sofia needed to be more like* her.

But how? As much as Sofia wanted to be different, if she knew how to make it happen, she'd have done it already. Girls like Ashlyn made it look so easy, so natural. But Sofia's natural state was just… meh. She had straight brown hair and brown eyes. She liked being on Cross Country, but she wasn't any kind of star athlete. She could never figure out how to flirt. Plus, she was short and flat chested and had zero trendy clothes.

She sank into the beanbag chair in the corner and got a notebook out of her backpack. The inside cover said "I love Mark Chen" in every color of Sharpie

marker. She flipped to a blank page and made a list of things to change about herself:

My hair
My clothes
My face
My personality
Get a tattoo?

She thought about her friends. Lately, every time she mentioned Mark, they'd roll their eyes and make snide remarks. After ten months of her hopeless crush, they were all super over it. She couldn't even ask them to help her.

There was only one person she could think of that had the impeccable style of an influencer and had turned out to be surprisingly nice.

Would he help her?

On one hand, he was obviously way too cool to hang out with her. But on the other hand, she couldn't think of any other way to transform herself. And she *needed* to transform. So she needed his help.

Quick, before she could lose her nerve, she got out her phone. She didn't have Holden's number or anything, but he wasn't hard to find online. Not giving herself time to overthink it, she sent a DM to @Holden_it_down.

Hi, it's Sofia. Remember me?

Given the crickets in the group chat, she figured Holden—like her friends and all normal people—was still asleep. Maybe he'd see the message in a few hours. But the reply popped up right away.

i never forget girls i find crying in the dark

Sofia really wished he'd stopped bringing that up. Maybe this was a bad idea.

Another message appeared.

feeling better today??

He really is nice, thought Sofia, *underneath all the teasing and posing.* She took a deep breath and replied.

I've been thinking about what we talked about. You know? All the stuff you told me I need to change.

for the record, you asked me a question and i answered it

i never said you had to change

do whatever you want

Sorry

Anyway, will you help me?

Help me fix myself, I mean?

The writing bubbles lasted longer this time. Sofia bunched some of the beanbag chair in her fist and used it like a stress ball. Waiting was excruciating. Finally, the answer popped up.

you want me to help you get fierce?? so mark will like you?

Yeah. Basically.

Again, the bubbles blinked too long before Holden's reply appeared.

we need to talk

what time can i come over?

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Chapter 6
Tastes Like Fame

Holden couldn't keep the grin off his face a few hours later as he locked his bike to the rickety railing at Sofia's front door. Ever since Sofia's DM, the boost from Igo Big felt like it had gone from a pipe dream to a legitimate possibility. After his huge surge of followers, he might get advertising deals, TV interviews.... It was possible that he'd meet Igo Big in real life. Maybe they'd do a collab for charity or something. Everything would take off from there, and Holden might even get his own reality show.

He hopped the two stairs and searched unsuccessfully for a doorbell before resorting to an old-fashioned knock.

Sofia opened the door so fast, she must have been waiting with her hand on the knob. She stepped out and closed it behind her. "Hi! Thanks for coming. Sorry if this is awkward. I know it's not normal for someone to ask—"

"Stop apologizing!" Holden commanded, adding a no-no word under his breath.

"What?"

"You say 'sorry' *all the time*. Stop it."

"Sorry!" Sofia looked pained and hugged herself. It made *him* want to apologize. Sheesh, this girl was so nice, it was contagious.

He tried to explain, "Seriously. This is Fierce Girl Lesson One: fierce girls aren't sorry. I mean—say whatever you want, and if someone wants to be a whiny baby about it, just be like, 'Sounds like a you problem.'"

Sofia perked up. "So you *will* help me?"

"Duh," Holden said, because he'd made it pretty obvious.

Sofia still looked unsure. "Does that mean yes?"

Holden's hands were cold. He shoved them into his hoodie pocket. "Can we go inside?"

"Oh, um, sure. Sorr— I mean—" Sofia clamped her mouth shut, and then turned quickly to open the door.

Holden stepped into a hodgepodge of a living room. A beanbag chair, an antique-looking lamp, and a futon were the main furniture in the room. The carpet was the brownish-green color of avocado skin that was last manufactured in 1979. Several shoes, a scarf, and Sofia's backpack were strewn around the floor. It was shabby with no chic. It seemed like the kind of place where you could put your feet on the furniture and no one would care. He liked it.

Sofia looked like another apology was about to burst out as she watched him taking in her house. He offered her a reassuring smile.

While Holden toed off his shoes, he checked out the photos on the wall. There was Sofia at every age from kindergarten through seventh grade, smiling out at him from eight mismatched frames. He pointed at one where she had straight-across bangs and no front teeth. "Aw, look at tiny you."

Sofia buried her face in the crook of her arm. "This is so embarrassing."

Then Holden saw something he recognized—a clumsy, mixed-medium collage that said, "Best Mom Ever." They had made this in art class in third grade to give to their moms for Mother's Day. Sofia's mom had framed hers and put it on the wall.

Holden remembered his mom's happy expression as she took the collage from his little-kid hands. He could hear her say, "You made this for me?! I feel so special!" He could feel her hug.

Third grade was the last year before his dad moved out amidst a hurricane of Mom screaming and weeping and smashing things that had lasted for days. At the time, he'd had no idea why everyone was so upset. But now, although he mostly tried not to think about it, he was old enough to figure out that it had a lot to do with a woman named Joss that his dad dated after that. She didn't last. Neither did the next girlfriend. Both women were there and gone before the lawyers were done asking him questions for the custody hearings. But eventually his dad got married again, and so did his mom. So now Holden was stuck with competing holidays and half living at two different houses and the constant

knowledge that he was a leftover from a disaster everyone would rather forget about.

At some point during his mom's "purging" and "moving on" and "nesting" phases, the "Best Mom Ever" collage ended up in the trash along with pretty much everything else.

Whatever. Why was he getting all feelsy over a garbage class project they made as little kids? He was mad at himself for even remembering it, and especially for the lump of self-pity he couldn't swallow.

He needed to focus on his "sphere of influence" (that's what the family therapist said). Right now that meant likes and follows and DMs and breaking two thousand. That was better than dwelling on depressing family drama that he had no control over.

"What's the matter?" Sofia's voice broke into his pity party.

Holden cleared his throat. "I have a proposition for you, Sofia. I think we can help each other out."

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"So, in exchange for helping me, you want to post before and after pictures," Sofia recapped after he'd explained the whole thing, "and tag what's his face—"

"Igo Big."

"And he has millions of followers. So he'll repost them, and then you'll be kind of internet famous."

"Actually," Holden pointed out, "*you'll* be kind of internet famous."

"For something that I want everyone to forget about!" Sofia's voice got high and thin—the exact opposite of assertiveness. Holden made a mental note that they'd have to work on that during Fierce Girl Lessons.

They were sitting on the futon, which was probably the second most uncomfortable thing Holden had ever sat on. It felt like it was stuffed with a combination of softballs and rocks. Sofia was curled up in the far corner, hugging her legs again. Holden, meanwhile, sat on the very edge and rested his elbows on his knees.

He promised smoothly, “We’ll make it so cool that the only thing people will remember is how fierce you are.”

“But that’s the thing!” Sofia protested. “I’m *not* fierce.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Holden reassured her. “I’m your coach.”

“For real? Promise?” Sofia gave him pleading manga eyes. Squeezed into a little ball, wearing a sweater with pink hearts all over it, she looked about as fierce as a mini Squishmallow. Also, Holden had never tried to teach anyone anything before. So, yeah. This could go horribly.

But Holden gave her a confident, Igo Big–inspired smile. “Absolutely.”

She still looked doubtful. “Do you think Mark will see them? The pictures?”

“Heck, yeah. He’ll be way into it.” Holden told himself he’d figure out how to make that true later.

“Okay,” Sofia said, unfolding herself and sitting up straight. “Let’s do it. Let’s make me fierce.”

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Chapter 7
Mostly All About Mark

Sofia felt like a character in a post-apocalyptic movie. Like she was somehow left behind while the rest of humanity was decimated or whisked away by aliens or something. Monday morning the school was deserted. Her entire friend group—along with just about everyone else—was gone. Even the Cross Country friends group chat had gone eerily silent. Reese had texted that she'd heard from her boyfriend Jamal that Andrew and Eve were both grounded from their phones. Sofia figured Destiny and Nina must have suffered the same fate. Which left Sofia utterly alone.

When she got to English, there was only one other person in the room—Pedro Alonso (who happened to be the only kid in eighth grade who made Sofia look tall). And he was wearing a T-shirt that said TEAM ANDREW. Her classmates were apparently drawing battle lines over Eve and Andrew's fight at Glow Night. *Poor Eve,* thought Sofia. *Poor Andrew.* Their friendship was maybe ruined, they were grounded, serving in-school suspension, and now people were making it a *thing.* Why did people have to pick sides, anyway? Couldn't nobody be the bad guy?

She didn't say any of this to Pedro, of course. She hated confrontations, and from what she'd observed this year, Pedro seemed to like them a little too much.

Mark came into class and slid into his normal seat—one forward and two over from Sofia. She could feel the gravity of the room shift. Everything leaned toward Mark. Sofia dipped her head and hid her face behind a sheet of hair. She would NOT stare at him.

"Where is everybody?" he asked the mostly empty room. "It's spooky in here."

Sofia knew the answer—everyone involved in the brawl at Glow Night had been given ISS and assigned to clean the gym. Destiny and Nina had texted her all the details Friday night. She licked her dry lips, working up to saying words to Mark.

But Pedro was already saying, "ISS, bruh. Did you see what happened at Glow Night?"

"I was there! It was bonkers!"

"How come you didn't get in trouble?" Pedro sounded suspicious.

Once again, Sofia knew the answer. But the two boys talked past her as if she were part of the furniture: desk, chair, Sofia, desk, whiteboard.

Sofia wondered how long it would take Holden to fix this. To fix *her*. She was so tired of blending in with the background.

Mark said, "I left a little early. How come *you* didn't get in trouble?"

"My mom forced me to go to a family thing," Pedro said bitterly. Then he threw his hands up, wailing, "I can't believe I missed it!"

The bell rang, and two more girls rushed in, followed by the English teacher, Mrs. Schmeckpepper. She surveyed the room with a sigh. "So, it is just... we few. We happy few."

Sofia joined the other four students in blank incomprehension.

Mrs. Schmeckpepper put her hands out like *hello?* and said, "Saint Crispin's Day? Henry the Fifth? Shakespeare?!"

The English teacher often spoke in obscure literary quotes and then acted shocked and disappointed that her students didn't recognize them. She also had quotes tacked up all over the walls. The poster directly in front of Sofia's desk said: I AM OUT WITH LANTERNS, LOOKING FOR MYSELF. —EMILY DICKINSON.

Mark raised his hand. When Mrs. Schmeckpepper pointed to him, he said, "We're only thirteen."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Chen," Mrs. Schmeckpepper said, only a little exasperation in her tone. "But 'hope springs eternal.'" She eyed them all before answering her own unspoken pop quiz. "Alexander Pope. *An Essay on Man*."

Mark raised his hand again. "I thought that was from the Bible."

"No." After a disappointed pause, Mrs. Schmeckpepper announced, "Well, with so many people scrubbing the gym today, there is obviously no point in

attempting to start our new novel study. However—"

Pedro's and Mark's hands both shot up. Without waiting to be called on, Pedro said, "Can we watch a movie?" All the students seconded the motion, but Mrs. Schmeckpepper shook her head.

"Nice try," she said dryly. "Actually, the dramatic events of the weekend do present us with a great opportunity to apply what we've been learning about how point of view affects a story. Talk to me—what different points of view could the story of Glow Night be told from, and how would it change the story?"

All the students clamped their mouths shut, waiting for somebody else to go first rather than risk sounding like either a noob or a word nerd. But Sofia secretly thought about how, from her point of view, Glow Night was just the setup for the real story—the one where she decided to stop sitting around waiting for Mark to notice her and *make* it happen. The one where she became her own main character.

That led her to think about Holden. On Saturday, he'd said he would help her. They made a deal and shook on it and everything. But could she count on him to actually follow through? What if, after he posted her pictures for that Big Ego guy, he lost interest and ditched her?

Eventually, Mrs. Schmeckpepper gave up waiting and called on one of the other girls, Olivia. Sofia was relieved it wasn't her because, to be honest, she'd forgotten the question.

Olivia said, "Well, I'm Team Andrew."

Pedro pumped his fist and hooted, "Yeah! Team Andrew!"

Olivia continued, "So, like, from Andrew's perspective, his ex-girlfriend just went berserk and attacked him for basically no reason."

Sofia sat up straighter. *That wasn't what happened at all!* Eve thought Andrew had betrayed her. She was really heartbroken. Sofia wanted to speak up to defend her friend. But what if Olivia got mad? What if the whole class turned on her? Confrontation was too risky. She slumped back down.

Mrs. Schmeckpepper did the hand wave that universally means *keep going*, and asked, "From Andrew's point of view, would this story be comedy, horror, suspense, drama...?"

"Not comedy," Olivia said emphatically.

"I think it was hilarious!" Pedro blurted. "Did you see the video with the comic-book effects added? Pow! Bang!" He looked around at everyone but Sofia, clearly hoping to get a laugh.

"Stay on topic, please, Mr. Alonso," Mrs. Schmeckpepper said with a pointed look. "But, yes, if we told the story from the perspective of an audience member, it might be a comedy. What about from a teacher's perspective?"

Sofia spoke up before the thought was even fully formed in her head. "It might be irony, because *somebody* must have thought it was a bad idea to have paintballs at an event for junior highers, and they'd be standing there going, 'Did anyone *not* see this coming?'"

Mark laughed. Looked right at her, still laughing, and nodded approvingly.

Sofia held on to her seat to keep from floating away as an angel choir silently sang "So This Is Love."

Mrs. Schmeckpepper kept talking about story perspective, but for the rest of class, Sofia's whole brain could hold only one thought: *Mark thinks I'm funny.*

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As the day wore on, Sofia saw more people with TEAM ANDREW and TEAM EVE swag—shirts, buttons, markered messages on their skin. She just really hoped that Eve and Andrew would both be okay and not get deep emotional wounds from the fight or from people taking sides against them.

Along with worrying about her friends, she was also dreading lunch. Normally she sat with Destiny and Eve, but both of them were in ISS. When she got to the cafeteria, it was exactly as awful as she'd predicted. Sofia sat alone, which was basically worse than dying. Then Mark, Ashlyn, and another girl walked in together and sat directly in her line of vision. So she was forced to witness their unattainable coolness for thirty excruciating minutes.

Okay, she did have to turn a little to watch them, but not really much at all.

While the veggie wrap her mom had made for her sat untouched, Sofia studied Mark, looking for any details she hadn't memorized yet. He laughed, pushing his glossy black hair away from his face and giving her a glimpse of his

cheekbone. That's right. Mark had visible cheekbones. Sofia's heart sped up a little. When he was really happy, she noted, a dimple popped in his left cheek. *Swoon.* The problem was, instead of looking at *her* and laughing, now it was Ashlyn he was popping that dimple for.

Sofia's focus shifted from Mark to Ashlyn. Aside from being classically pretty and looking about five years older than Sofia, Ashlyn seemed to take up way more space than Sofia did. She threw her arms out wide while she was talking, not caring that she knocked a water bottle off the table. She jumped up and did a goofy viral dance. She did a spit take at something Mark said and then doubled over laughing that she'd gotten his shirt all wet.

If Sofia had done any one of those things, she'd be mortified and apologize at least a hundred times and probably hide for the rest of the day.

It was a relief when the bell rang to end lunch. Sofia carefully rewrapped her picked-at veggie wrap, zipped her lunch bag, and took it to her locker for later. Then she had to scamper to get to math on time.

As soon as she dropped into her seat, Holden hopped over a desk chair and sat behind her. "Hey, Kid Sis. Why do you look so gloomy?"

Sofia shrugged. "It's just kind of lonely today. I have no friends."

Holden tweaked her ponytail. "Ouch, girl. Cuz I'm *right here*."

Sofia turned to give him a smile. Until two days ago, she would have assumed he was making fun of her. Since yesterday, she'd thought of him as kind of like a lab partner. But today, in the biggest plot twist of her life so far, Holden Thomas was declaring them friends. After sitting alone at lunch, she felt nothing but gratitude for his friendship.

The moment the bell rang, the math teacher, Mr. Katayama, announced that since there were only three kids in class, they'd spend the next two days reviewing. He also told them, looking benevolently at Holden, that they didn't have to be in their assigned seats as long as they were quiet. It turned out that when eighty percent of the eighth grade was suspended, the other twenty percent basically got two free days to do whatever.

The teacher passed out review packets. Holden passed her a note.

It just said "Holden" and a phone number.

"What's yours?" he whispered. "So we can make a plan."

She wrote hers on the corner of her notebook, creased the paper back and forth a few times so it would tear straight and quietly, and slid it onto his desk.

"Seriously?" came his answering whisper. "Bubble letters? And you dot your 'i' with a smiley face?"

Sofia turned around and scrunched her nose at him. She liked her happy signature.

"It's little kiddish. Not fierce."

That stung. It made her want to take back the *We're friends* smile she'd given him a couple of minutes ago. But then she thought about how Mark was completely absorbed by Ashlyn at lunch. And at Glow Night. And how much she wanted Mark to look at *her* like that. Plus, really, she had asked for Holden's help. So she'd better get used to his comments stinging a little.

She spent the rest of math practicing writing her name in a classy, nonkiddish way. Instead of a smiley face, she put a little heart over the i—just for Mark.

Sofia

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Chapter 8
Squishmallows Can't Punch

School was so depopulated on Monday after the Glow Night brawl that Holden started wishing he had gotten ISS too. He imagined everyone in the gym having a blast and forming lifelong bonds without him. By last period band, he had full-blown FOMO.

There were only a handful of kids in the band room, including Preston the trombone player, Yvonne (a flute player Holden had dated for a couple of weeks last spring), a few other woodwinds, and Arav (holding down the entire percussion section by himself).

Mr. Handen, the band director, promptly declared that they would have study hall instead of band practice for the next two days. Holden slumped in his seat. He always looked forward to playing trumpet. It was one thing he was good at. And it was really cool to hear all the different sounds come together to make something coherent.

As he considered possible ways to sneak into ISS, he saw Preston talking to Yvonne and the other girls. It felt almost—but not quite—like not getting invited to a party. The mini band party was much easier to crash than the big ISS party, though. He sauntered toward them.

"—only ten dollars. I've got light blue and black."

"Sup, guuurls?" Holden asked, rolling imaginary dice at their feet. He gave each of the girls the eyebrow quirk he'd been practicing. Yvonne rolled her eyes. Another girl, Tylee Baker—cute and blond with braces—giggled behind her hand. The third girl, Claudette Ko—who had serious Wednesday Addams energy—glared. Or maybe that was just her face.

Holden bobbed his chin toward Preston. "What are you selling?"

"Team Andrew T-shirts," Preston said, holding up a blue shirt. "My parents own a custom screen-printing shop, so we printed these over the weekend. Hey, Arav, you in?"

Holden wouldn't have even noticed Arav joining the group if Preston hadn't said something—the guy was so quiet and analytical.

Claudette crossed her arms. "What if I want to be Team Eve?"

"What?! No!" Preston was adamant. "Band has to stick together. We have to support our bandmate."

Holden pulled out his wallet. "Who wants one? I'm buying!"

Tylee made an "aww" noise and put her hand on her heart. Claudette's glaring eyes went slightly wide. Holden felt like reaching over his shoulder and patting his own back.

Money was not one of Holden's problems. His parents were always trying to outdo each other, and probably soothe their consciences, with cash. Plus, all four sets of grandparents chose to give him money rather than try to get to know him. He might as well use those Benjamins to score relationship points.

Yvonne chewed her lip and acted like she might refuse, but she didn't look away as Holden peeled twenties from his stash. He said, "Come on. You want one, right?"

In the end, they all accepted his offer. After glancing around to verify that Mr. Handen wasn't paying attention, Holden whipped off his T-shirt—making sure to keep his abs tight. Tylee's cheeks went pink. Yvonne went, "Gah! Put it away, Holden. Nobody wants to see that."

Without rushing, he pulled the new shirt over his head. "You're just being salty 'cause you miss this," he countered, not letting a hint of self-consciousness show on his face as he smoothed the shirt down theatrically. Then he retreated before she had a chance to say anything truly cutting, calling "Team Andrew!" over his shoulder.

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Fifty minutes later Holden faced the worst part of the day. Marching band season was over, and basketball hadn't started yet, so after school there was

nothing to do but go home. Once again, he found himself envying the kids in ISS—they got to stay for another hour.

For a few minutes he stood next to Arav in the huddle of kids waiting for a ride home. But they didn't have much to talk about, no one was coming for him, and once Arav got picked up, Holden was alone in the crowd. It was the second-worst place to be, after home.

As he reached for his phone to check in on socials, he spotted a pink puffy coat heading toward the crosswalk. Holden tucked his phone back into his pocket and wove through the clumps of kids to catch up with the coat's owner. He was a little concerned that people would see him with Sofia and think he was settling for her. But almost everyone whose opinion mattered was scrubbing the gym. Besides, Holden had to admit that Sofia was easy to be with. The pressure was off when he was with her—he had no reason to impress her, and she was almost weirdly nice. It was by far a better option than going home or loitering at school by himself.

"Sofia!" he called when he was close enough. She looked over and then settled into a posture of waiting for him. Not everyone would do that—several ex-girlfriends came to mind.

"Hey, girl. Sup?"

"Hi, Holden."

They crossed the street together and headed down the same path they'd taken Friday night. Sofia asked, "Do you live this way?"

"Nope. Total opposite direction, actually."

She seemed to get a little smaller. "You really don't have to walk with me."

"I know," Holden said. "I want to, though."

"Oh. Kay. Thanks." She paused and then said, "Normally I get a ride home with Destiny."

Holden batted at a low-hanging tree branch. "Let me guess, your mom is teaching a yoga class?"

Sofia jumped for the same branch but couldn't reach it. "She drives for Uber in the afternoon. Then she teaches yoga classes on nights and weekends."

"Cool." Holden didn't know what else to say.

"It's just her and me, and this is an expensive area to live, but it's got the best schools, so." She kicked at some dead leaves that had accumulated at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Holden let his voice sound as uncomfortable as he felt. Too much family talk. He had a strict policy of never talking about his family. Why would he bring that mess into the rest of his life?

Sofia looked embarrassed. "I guess I just say whatever's in my head. Sorry."

"*Don't* apologize." Holden thought fast to fill the silence and change the subject. "So how are things with Mark?"

Sofia went red. She said miserably, "He seems really into Ashlyn. Which makes total sense. She is so, so pretty and sooo *tall*."

"You are too."

Sofia made a *You must be joking* face at him.

Holden shrugged. "Well, not the tall part."

Sofia hung her head. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked defeated. Holden swung around and stopped right in front of her, forcing her to square up with him. She managed not to run into him but did step on his foot. "Oh, sorry, sorry," she stammered.

"Don't apologize!" Holden reminded her for what must be the hundredth time. Time to switch to coach mode. "We talked about this. If you don't like the short joke, just punch me or something. That's what Ashlyn would do."

"I'm not going to hit you," Sofia said, sounding like he'd told her to commit a crime.

"You can't possibly hurt me." Holden grinned and added, "I mean, don't aim for my nose or anything. Just a friendly arm punch. Go ahead."

Sofia shook her head, her hands clasped behind her back.

"I'm your coach, right?" he urged. "It's either this—" He pointed to his bicep. "Or burn me back. Say, 'I might still grow, but you're stuck with that face.'"

Sofia choked. "I can't say that! It's so mean!"

"Then let me have it."

Reluctantly, Sofia tapped Holden's arm.

"We'll keep working on it," Holden said, resuming the walk.

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Chapter 9
Sharing Secrets in the Shampoo Aisle

As they walked, Sofia shuffled her feet through unraked leaves. So far Coach Holden had taught her exactly two things:

> Don't say sorry, and
> Do hit people.

Basically the exact opposite of what every kid on the planet was taught since preschool. It felt disorienting and vaguely immoral. She needed to focus on something more concrete. Something with tangible results.

She shoved her hair out of her face for the fortieth time that day. She hadn't worn a barrette since Holden had told her it was little kiddish, so now her hair was perpetually in her eyes. It was definitely a problem. Along with her wardrobe, her baby face, and her G-rated reputation.

But a girl's gotta start somewhere.

"So I was thinking about doing something with my hair," she said, impatiently tucking it behind her ear. "But I don't know what to do with it. Should I cut it all off? Or bleach it blond so I'd look more like Ashlyn? Or..." Sofia finished with a look that said, *Your turn*.

Holden immediately started tapping at his phone. "I got you." It took him all of ten seconds to pull up a list of hair trends. "Do you like any of these?"

Sofia studied the hairstyles as they scrolled past on the screen. She was honestly kind of scared to try to pull off anything fancier than the straight-across blunt cut her mom always gave her at home. What if it looked terrible? What if everyone thought she was trying too hard? The thing about hair is, it doesn't grow that fast. She could be living with regret for a *very* long time.

But she had to try. She couldn't stay the way she was.

She pointed to one that caught her attention. "I like that."

The girl in the photo had dark brown hair about the same color as Sofia's, but there was one blond chunk behind her ear and shaggy layers framed her face. Without consciously deciding to, Sofia imitated the open-mouthed pout the model was doing.

Through a sudden fit of laughter, Holden said, "What's happening to your face?!"

Sofia slapped her hands over her eyes. "Oh my gosh, I'm so embarrassed. I'm so weird. I hate it."

Holden stopped laughing. "No!" he commanded seriously. "Look right at me and do it harder. Do. Not. Care. Be fierce!"

Reluctantly, Sofia forced her hands down, but she couldn't make her features do anything but grimace. This was mortifying. And they had stopped walking. The people who lived in these houses were probably watching out their windows and realizing she was the biggest dork ever.

"Come on, you got this. Show me my opinion doesn't matter. Zero fire trucks given."

"Fire trucks?"

"Do it."

With a deep, resigned inhale, and a muttered, "Yes, Coach," Sofia pouted. She let her mouth fall open and her eyes half close as she imagined an inch-thick layer of gloss shimmering on her lips. Then she dissolved into giggles alongside Holden because it was so ridiculous. It was actually a relief to laugh at herself.

When their laughter abated, Holden started walking again, but in the wrong direction.

"My house is that way," Sofia said, scampering to catch him and waving her arm behind her.

"Yeah, but the drugstore is *this* way." Holden shot her a cocky half grin—the one that made her feel like she shouldn't trust him. Like he was up to something. He said, "We need supplies."

It hadn't fully registered until this moment that transforming herself was going to cost literal money. Her heart sank.

Sofia spent the whole walk to the drugstore trying to come up with exactly the right words to tell Holden that she couldn't buy stuff. Her mom was barely scraping by and never gave Sofia an allowance or anything. She couldn't just ask her for a twenty whenever she wanted like Destiny could with her parents. Being poor in a school full of kids with money was humiliating enough, and telling Holden-with-the-name-brand-everything about it was a quadruple dose of shame. Probably most people would have just made up an excuse not to go to the store, but Sofia was a horrible liar. She hated it, and she was bad at it.

So she let Holden watch DIY hair tutorials while she formulated the exact best way to back out. It was the mechanical *whoosh* of the store door sliding open that galvanized her.

"Um, Holden?" she whisper yelled, hanging back.

He paused in the entrance and looked back at her.

"The thing is, I, um, don't have any money with me." There. The implied temporary cash flow issue was a lot less embarrassing than permanent poverty.

"Don't worry about it. I got it." The statement and the look he gave her were both self-congratulatory. Like he thought he was extra cool for being able to pay for stuff when she couldn't.

Sofia contemplated her shoes, stalling, until Holden took hold of the loop on her backpack and pulled her into the store with him. He grabbed a basket and, while marching them down the hair-care aisle, started dropping things into it—hair bleach kit, rat-tail comb, scissors. Sofia couldn't help but keep a mental tally—$16.99 plus $1.99 plus $9.59. How was she going to pay him back, like, *ever*?

"Holden, maybe we could skip the hair thing. It was a dumb idea. I'd rather just—"

Holden kept walking up the aisle. "Are you getting cold feet?"

"No. I just. Um," Sofia stammered, matching his pace. Holden stopped suddenly, causing Sofia to crash into him. "Sor—" She swallowed the rest.

"What's the problem? Don't you want to blow Mark's mind?"

Sofia's heart squeezed at the thought of Mark and the improbability of him ever liking her back—especially since she couldn't actually afford to transform herself. She took a bracing breath, glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, and whispered, "I can't pay you back."

Holden laughed.

Like *anything* was funny.

Sofia pressed her lips together, trying not to look like she was dying inside.

Holden set the basket down pointedly and put his hands firmly on her shoulders, basically forcing her to look at him. "Sofia, I *want* to buy this stuff. I *don't* want you to pay me back. It's literally no big deal."

"Why?"

"I take care of my friends." He gave her the cocky, self-satisfied smirk again.

She twisted away from that fake smile and found herself staring at the dandruff control shampoo. She knew she had to say something after that escape maneuver, or his feelings would be hurt.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Sofia said, trying and failing to keep the apology out of her voice, "but when you make that face, I don't know what's really going on with you."

"Huh?"

She struggled for the right words, glancing up to see their effect. "It's hard to trust you because I can't tell what you're really thinking or feeling."

Holden gaped at her. And then he let down a wall that Sofia had kind of felt was there but hadn't quite been able to identify. She saw pain and self-doubt in his eyes for a split second before he turned away. Now he was the one avoiding her gaze as he told her, like a secret, "Home sucks, okay? My parents throw money at me because that's how they fix any problem, and that's what I am to them—a problem."

Sofia had no idea what that confession had to do with anything, but it redlined her sympathy reflex. She wanted to say, *I'm sure your parents really love you*, but she didn't know them at all, so she couldn't promise him that. The only thing she knew to do was put her hand on his back to help ground him, like her mom always did for her.

Holden took a quick breath, and his next words were casual and confident again. "Anyway, just let me spend the money, okay? It's an investment. If Igo Big boosts our pics, whatever I spend will be worth it for all the followers I'll get." His eyes darted to her and then away again. "And don't tell anybody about the family thing, okay? Promise."

"Why?"

"It's just..." He swore, then clamped his hand over his mouth.

"I won't tell," Sofia promised. She felt honored that he trusted her with the truth. "Thank you for sharing your story. It means a lot."

He muttered a probable swear word, his practiced smirk sliding back into place. "You sound like a middle-aged social worker at a recovery group. Not fierce."

That stung. But Sofia got it now—that he was deflecting attention away from the places inside him too tender to touch. And she knew what to do. She punched him.

He scoffed, "Did a butterfly just land on my arm?"

She couldn't help but laugh. When his cocky grin came back, she didn't mind it anymore. He picked up the shopping basket and announced, "We're going to need snacks. Do you like Sour Patch Kids?"

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Chapter 10
Just Say Thanks

The moment Sofia opened her front door, a rich, delicious smell hit Holden right in the salivary glands. Sofia toed off her sneakers and left them near the door. She shrugged out of her backpack and dropped it onto the floor. Then she tossed her pink puffy jacket onto the futon.

Holden's mom would flip out if he left his stuff around like that.

"Come on," Sofia said, waving him farther into the house.

Holden slid off his coat. As he did, Sofia's nose crinkled and her lips pressed into a tight frown.

"What?" he asked.

"Oh, sorry. It's your shirt. I just wish everyone wasn't wearing Team Andrew stuff."

"You're Team Eve," he guessed.

"I'm Team Friendship! They used to be *best friends*!"

Holden shrugged with a sarcastic "Kumbaya."

Honestly, he didn't super care about the whole situation. He barely knew Eve, and he couldn't shake the feeling that Andrew didn't like him. He'd just gotten the shirt so he wouldn't be left out.

"Where are we doing your hair?"

"How about in here?" she said, leading him through a doorway into a cramped kitchen. The mouthwatering smell was even stronger in here, wafting from a Crock-Pot on the counter and a boxy appliance Holden didn't recognize. Next to the boxy thing was a square of paper with Sofia's name on it. She picked it up and read it, her expression giving him no hint what it said.

He was forced to ask, "What's that?"

"Just a 'welcome home' note from my mom. She always writes me notes and leaves them all over—like in my lunch bag, the bathroom, and wherever."

The lump was back in his throat again. Shouting swear words felt like the only thing that would make it go away. But he didn't want to be responsible for corrupting Sofia. So instead he said, "Aaaaaaw," and made a face like Sofia was a cute little baby. She looked away, clearly embarrassed. He *really* had to get her to stop acting self-conscious about everything.

"Are you sure you can cut hair?" Sofia asked, clearly wanting to stop talking about mommy love notes as much as he did.

"Yeah." He gave her the *I got this* look he'd learned from Igo Big. "I watched the video like three times. It looks pretty easy."

"Okay." Sofia took a big breath. "Wait here. I'll grab the tall stool from the basement."

Holden sat at the tiny kitchen table while she disappeared through a narrow door. The window over the table had a view of a scrap pile of roofing and siding that he guessed passed for a detached garage and, past that, the newer stone, two-story house next door. He pulled out his phone to check in online. He had dozens of notifications of new posts from people he followed. He only had time to scroll through a few before Sofia was back with the stool. She sat next to him, leaning close enough to see his screen.

They spent a few minutes watching videos on Holden's phone, eating Sour Patch Kids, and talking about ideas. They decided that instead of just taking before and after pictures, Holden would make a cool video where it looked like Sofia spun around and transformed. All they had to do was film two spins—one before and one after the haircut—and then edit them together.

Decision made, they picked the exact spots they would each stand so the two video clips would match perfectly. Holden's back was against the wall right next to the window, and Sofia's left toe was on the peeling corner of a linoleum square.

She tucked her hair behind her ear, looking up through her lashes. "Should I do it?"

When he said, "Yeah, go," she spun around.

It took a lot longer to cut Sofia's hair than he had figured. Way more than an hour. The video made it look like it would take about three minutes to give her shaggy layers, but Holden had to go slowly to make sure he got it even. While he was painting the bleach onto her hair, some dripped onto the purple shirt she was wearing, which slowed the process because they spent five minutes arguing about whether Holden was allowed to buy her a new one. Then the bleach had to sit in her hair for, like, half an hour. Shockingly, they never ran out of stuff to talk about. True, the conversation circled back to Mark pretty often, but it never got awkward.

After they rinsed the bleach out, Sofia left him in the kitchen while she went to use her mom's hair dryer. He zoned out on his phone while he waited, trying to ignore the hunger that the candy hadn't filled and the delicious smell of someone else's dinner.

When Sofia reappeared, she looked shook—eyes wide, brows up. Like she didn't know how to react. Holden thought her hair looked a lot like the girl in the picture they'd copied. She looked instantly three years older.

"Hey! Welcome to eighth grade!" he greeted her. "Do you like it?"

"I LOVE IT!" she squealed, bouncing and tiny clapping. "Thank you."

Holden had dated and almost dated and talked to and hung out with a bunch of different girls. But not one of them had ever looked at him the way Sofia was right now. Like he had done something really heroic. He could live off that look for a long time.

He cleared his throat. "You look really pretty."

Her reaction was immediate and painful. Her whole face turned red; she averted her eyes and said, "No I don't. My face is blah, and I'm short, and—"

"STOP," Holden commanded. "Fierce girls have to be able to take a compliment."

Sofia pressed her lips together. *"Ugh!"* It sounded like a cry of pain. "I don't want to seem too into myself. And, honestly, I don't *feel*—"

"I don't care about your feelings," Holden said in a sharp, authoritative voice. "When someone says something nice about you, you say 'thanks.' That's all."

"Yes, Coach," Sofia conceded with a tormented look.

"Nice smile," Holden offered.

"Very funny."

"Wrong." Holden huffed impatiently, and repeated. "Nice. Smile."

Sofia sighed. "Thanks, but—"

"*Just* 'thanks,'" Holden ordered. Then he said, "You've got beautiful eyes."

For a second Sofia looked like she was about to break under torture. Finally, she wheezed, "Thanks."

Holden looked her over for something else to compliment. He didn't have much to work with. The bleach-stained shirt was old and stretched out, and she'd paired it with off-brand sweatpants. He gave her an Igo Big chin bob and made his voice silky. "You look *hot* in that outfit."

Sofia rolled her eyes. But she said "thaaanks," fisted the shirt's hem and made duck lips. Then she dissolved into just the cutest laugh Holden had ever heard. He couldn't help it—he laughed with her.

Then he smiled like a proud teacher. "Fierce girl level two—achieved. Let's do the video."

Sofia found her mark on the peeling tile, and Holden pressed himself against the wall. When he told her to, she spun around, tossing her hair at the end in her excitement. Her smile radiated pure joy.

"Got it," Holden said, tapping the red circle to stop recording. "Now we just have to edit it and post it."

While he was still talking, they heard the front door open and a female voice called, "I'm home!"

"Hi, Mom! In here!" Sofia called back. She flashed Holden a nervous grimace before turning to face the doorway.

"They are *murdering* me at the grocery store. Can you believe I paid six-fifty for—" Sofia's mom appeared with a grocery bag in each hand, froze midway through her sentence, and stared at Sofia. Then her eyes took in the mess they'd made of the kitchen and Holden's presence. Maybe they should have checked with her parent before doing this. He braced for screaming.

The woman—who looked like an older, slightly taller version of Sofia—settled her scrutiny back on her daughter. "Wow."

"What do you think? I should have asked. I'm sor—" Sofia babbled.

"You're beautiful!" Her mom put the bags on the counter and opened her arms. "Just like before. But this is *fabulous*. You look so grown up!"

Sofia stepped into her mother's embrace. So easily.

Over Sofia's shoulder, her mom's sparkling eyes locked on Holden. "And who's this?" she asked.

Sofia turned out of the hug. "Mom, this is my friend Holden. Holden, this is my mom."

"Kelsey," the woman added. She pressed her hands together like she was praying and said, "Namaste and Jai Mashi, Holden." Then she picked up one of the grocery bags and began quickly unloading it into the fridge. "Are you guys hungry? Because I'm starving, and this smells amazing, not to brag."

It took Holden a few seconds to wrap his brain around what was happening. Sofia's mom was inviting him to dinner. Not even inviting really—like as if he were a guest—but just assuming she should feed him, like he belonged here. In fact, she was already getting out three soup bowls, looking into the boxy thing and chattering, "Fresh bread! Mmmmm. I swear this bread maker was the garage sale find of the century. After we eat, I have to change for yoga class, and you two need to do some *serious* triage in this kitchen."

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Chapter 11
Wherefore Art Thou, Mark?

School was still a ghost town on Tuesday—day two of school-wide ISS. Even Mrs. Schmeckpepper finally gave up trying to teach. With a defeated, "Clocks slay time, as William Faulkner tells us. And we have fifty minutes to kill," she turned on *Newsies.*

Sofia alternated between watching Mark watch *Newsies* and doodling in her notebook. She practiced her new signature for a while, letting it morph from *Sofia Santini* to *Sofia Chen* and then *mark & Sofia Chen* and finally *Sofia ♥ Mark 4ever*.

"Hey," Mark's voice interrupted her reverie.

She slammed the notebook closed, her face instantly going up in flames.

"Do you have an extra pen?" he whispered. If he'd seen his name all over her paper, he gave no hint.

Sofia desperately swallowed down her embarrassment. "Oh, uh, yeah, here," she stammered, fumbling her open pencil pouch at him with shaking hands.

Mark took a blue pen. "Thanks," he said, already turning to leave. "Cool hair, by the way."

She froze, eyes wide, mind blank. And then he was back in his seat.

Sofia silently beat herself up while the newspaper boys on the screen sang about being king of New York. Mark liked her hair, and she blew it! She didn't even say thanks! Why did she freeze every time Mark talked to her or looked at her? Why couldn't she say something witty and flirty? Or, for Pete's sake, just normal and human? Now that he was safely facing the other way, scribbling away with her pen, she could think of tons of cute responses to the pen request.

What will you give me for it?

What's it worth to you?

Anything for you, Mark.

And then she'd give him a wink or something. Or not. Was a wink little kiddish? She'd have to ask Holden.

The thing was, she'd spent five straight hours with Holden yesterday and hadn't frozen up once. Even when he'd tortured her with compliments, they'd been able to laugh about it in the end. They'd talked and had fun the whole time, even while they cleaned the kitchen after dinner. But, Sofia figured, that's because she didn't *like* him, and he'd never ever like her—not like *that*. It's easy to hang out with someone when there's no pressure to get them to like you. The trouble with Mark was that she just loved him too much.

Maybe if Holden helped her practice some flirty expressions and responses, she'd be ready next time and not blow it.

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Lunch was the low point again, sitting alone between the empty seats normally reserved for Destiny and Eve. This time, instead of torturing herself analyzing Ashlyn's perfection, she pulled out her phone and sent a message.

Sofia

lunch is so lonely! 😭

The response came in seconds.

Coach

💯 study hall too

Sofia

I usually never have my phone out at school 😐 I hope I don't get in trouble!

Coach

girl

never tell anyone else that 😂 rule follower = not fierce 🤣

Sofia

sorry!!

Coach

😒

Sofia

NOT sorry!!

Coach

better 😆 did u see our vid from last night?

Sofia

NO 😬 you posted it?! I'm scared!!!! 😱

Holden's next text was just a link. Both knees bouncing with nervous energy, Sofia clicked it and watched their post.

In the video, Sofia looked at the camera self-consciously, her straight brown hair hanging down to her elbows. Holden had added a popular boy band song and blurred out the messy kitchen in the background. After a second she spun around (there was only a little glitch where Holden had spliced the two videos), and her hair was changed. Her spin ended with a hair toss she hadn't realized she'd done, and then she looked into the camera, smiling so big, her nose crinkled.

Sofia reflexively crinkled her nose at the video, then willed it to smooth out. She hated when her nose did that. But the video wasn't too bad. It made it look like her cut and color only took a split second instead of literally hours. And it already had fifty-three likes. It seemed like a ton of people from school were following @Holden_it_down. Even Mark. She watched it a few more times, smiling bigger every time.

"You like it?" Holden said in her ear, startling her so much, she almost fell off the bench. He laughed, "Girl, chill!"

Sofia put her hand on her heart and tried to catch her breath. "What are you doing here?"

Holden jiggled a bathroom pass and shot her his practiced smirk.

"You're going to get in trouble," Sofia said, scooting over to make room for him to sit.

He draped himself on the bench—legs apart, leaning back on his elbows—like he was posing for a picture for one of those stores in the mall. He said, "The video turned out great, right? It took me till almost midnight to get it right."

"You're allowed to stay up until midnight?!" Sofia blurted.

Holden laughed and said something about her baby bedtime. But Sofia wasn't totally paying attention, because she had noticed that a couple of band girls were looking at them. Then Ashlyn and her volleyball friend, at the next table, looked toward Sofia too. Maybe they'd seen Holden's post. Maybe they were noticing her hair!

Ashlyn said something, and Mark looked toward Sofia.

"Mark is looking over here!" Sofia gasped. "Oh my gosh. What do I do?"

"Stop panicking! Just be normal," Holden whisper yelled. He cast a glance around at the girls, acknowledging each with a tiny chin bob or an eyebrow raise. Smirking toward Mark, he ventriloquist whispered, "Pretend I said something funny. Show Mark how much fun you're having."

Sofia performed the least believable fake laugh in the history of trying to impress a crush. That made Holden crack up for real, which he punctuated with a well-timed finger comb of his perfectly styled hair. Sofia took mental notes, hoping she could get as good as him at keeping her cool when people were looking at her. Maybe she'd ask Holden to help her practice it after school.

For now, all she could do was try not to visibly panic until Mark finally looked away.

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Chapter 12
Never Let 'Em See You Sweat

Holden didn't get in trouble. The study hall teacher didn't even look up from the papers he was grading when, after being gone for twenty minutes, Holden strolled back into class just in time to return the bathroom pass before the bell rang.

Math was another boring hour when they were supposed to work silently on a pointless review packet. Holden sat behind Sofia again. Her hair was a *little* uneven, but it still looked amazing—a fact he felt personally proud of. However, she was wearing a sweatshirt decorated with a cartoony sequined bee and the word "kind." It was like she *wanted* to be teased. He tore out a piece of notebook paper and scribbled: "Fifth grade called. It wants its sweatshirt back."

He folded the paper, reached over her shoulder, and dropped it onto her desk.

Usually he hung out with Mateo Ramirez and Jamal Jones in math class, but since they were both still in ISS—along with practically everyone else—Sofia was the stand-in friend. Although now that they'd been hanging out for a few days, she didn't feel like a second choice anymore. She was easy to be around. And super fun to tease.

When the note came back to him, she had written in her girlish bubbly handwriting: "BEE nice! My grandma gave me this shirt!"

Chuckling silently to himself, Holden wrote back: "I have science with Chen next. Should I tell him you think he's BEE-utiful?"

He refolded it and shoved it down the back of her collar.

Sofia squeaked, which made Holden snort back a laugh. Then she reached back, dug the note out of her shirt, and unfolded it. She gasped and scribbled frantically before passing it back.

It said: “Don’t you dare!”

He wrote back: “K. I’ll just tell him you want to BEE his sugar boo.”

She hastily responded: “Please don’t talk to him! I’m serious!! I need to fix myself some more, and then I’ll figure out how to talk to him.”

Holden’s pencil hovered over the paper. He was torn between telling her that she didn’t need to fix herself because she wasn’t broken and teasing her about Mark some more. He was starting to wonder if he’d done the right thing, agreeing to help her get fierce. Maybe, if he was more mature, he would have said something like, *Never try to change yourself for a boy.* But if she wanted to change, who was he to tell her not to? Wasn’t that paternalistic or whatever?

And now he didn’t want to say anything to stop the project. Doing her hair and hanging out had been a lot of fun yesterday. He was practically sure Igo Big would boost him any second. And he would feel like an actual genie if he managed to get Mark to forget about volleyball girls and date the school Goody Two-shoes.

Holden shook off the annoyingly deep thoughts and wrote back: “What’s up next in our project?”

A minute later she slid the note onto his desk. Under his question she’d written: “idk—clothes maybe?”

Mr. Katayama chose that moment to descend on them. He appeared suddenly, towering over Holden’s desk, hand jutting out.

A little jolt of adrenaline caused a not-safe-for-school word to slip out of Holden’s mouth.

“Give me the note, Mr. Thomas,” the teacher demanded.

Honestly, Holden had assumed the whole “no passing notes” rule didn’t apply when there were only five people in the class. He hadn’t even been trying to be sneaky. Sofia cast him a panicked look over her shoulder. She really might burst out crying. She’d probably never gotten in trouble before. But the real kicker was that he had outed Sofia’s crush on Mark on this paper. If Katayama read it out loud, which was his standard punishment, she might die of embarrassment.

Holden balled the paper in his fist.

“What note?” he said casually, crumpling it up even tighter.

"Either give me the paper in your hand," Katayama said firmly, "or receive a detention."

Holden tried to stare down the teacher, but—he couldn't help it—he cut Sofia a quick look. Her lip was trembling, and her eyes brimmed.

Holden refocused on Mr. Katayama, forcing a careless smirk onto his face. "I'll take option B," he said coolly, stuffing the ball of paper deep into his jeans pocket.

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Holden walked out of class carrying a bright-pink detention slip, which directed him to report to the gymnasium after school. He had no regrets. While Katayama had been imperiously filling out the detention, Sofia had been giving him the look again—the one that made him feel like a hero. Plus, he'd finally get to hang with the ISS kids.

He was still carrying the pink slip like a badge of honor when he walked into band after science class.

"Hiii, Holden!" Tylee greeted him, drawing out the "hi" in a way that sounded to Holden like, *I'm into you.*

Claudette, next to her, gave him a deadpan "hey." But she was watching him with interest.

Inwardly, Holden went into a tailspin. His chest puffed with the attention. His imagination went into overdrive with possibilities—they were both completely datable. But he also had a gut-level suspicion that they liked him because he bought them T-shirts and that anyone who would get interested in him over ten measly bucks was kinda sus. And then, for some really weird reason, Sofia came into his head, and he wondered what she'd think of people flirting with him.

But Holden had practiced in the mirror long and hard for moments like this, to make sure no self-consciousness or uncertainty ever leaked out. So, outwardly, he stayed cool. He graced them both with a half smile that was practically a kiss. "Sup, gurlz?"

Tylee giggled. Claudette rolled her eyes, but the corner of her mouth said she was into it.

"You got a detention?" Tylee asked. "We were going to see if you wanted to hang out after school."

Holden was tempted to say, *Wow girl, slow down.* But he hadn't decided where any of this might go yet. And, honestly, who wouldn't feel great having someone interested in them?

Mark, came the unbidden answer, along with the memory of Mark looking over during lunch. He must have seen Sofia blushing and squirming—clearly crushing hard. But he'd just ignored her and went back to eating. Sure, he'd had Ashlyn and her friend to distract him, but still. Sofia was special. He should be able to see that.

Holden shrugged away the thought. He'd agreed to help Sofia do a glow up. Mark's reaction wasn't in his sphere of influence.

"Maybe another day," Tylee offered.

"Yeah, hit me up," Holden said noncommittally. "That would be cool."

Only when Tylee and Claudette walked away did Holden notice Preston giving him W fingers and a look that said, *I just realized you have superpowers.* That felt good.

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An hour later Holden felt distinctly less superpowered as he scraped neon paint out of the crevices in the foldaway bleachers with a library card and a toothbrush.

Mateo Ramirez and Jamal Jones cleaned lackadaisically next to him, moving their paper towels around just enough to not get yelled at. Andrew, who was usually inseparable from them, was polishing the trophy case with Eve and looking pretty happy about it.

"So what did we miss?" Ramirez asked.

"Literally nothing," Holden said. "Everyone cool is in here. It's been dead boring."

Even as the words were coming out of his mouth, Holden realized they weren't true. But for some reason, he didn't feel like telling the guys about hanging out with Sofia. They wouldn't get it, and he didn't think he'd be able to explain it just right. The best way to approach it would be to show them Sofia's spin transformation video, but Ostridge Beak had made him add his phone to an overflowing basket of tech at the door. Maybe he should just ask them if they saw his post.

Jamal said, "Ten more minutes, and we're outta here. Ima call Reese when I get home."

Ramirez snorted. "Dude, she dumped you at Glow Night, right?"

Jamal shrugged. "Yeah, but we started talking again. I think we're gonna get back together."

Holden held out his fist in congratulations. Jamal eyed it skeptically, and Holden got a queasy feeling that Jamal was going to leave him hanging. Holden covered his anxiety with a shoulder flex, a classic Igo Big bro face, and a congratulatory "Daaawg."

It must have worked because Jamal bumped his knuckles lightly. Crisis averted.

Holden wondered if the guys would think more of him if he told them about Tylee and Claudette. But he didn't feel like saying anything about that, either. What was wrong with him today?

After the fist bump, the guys kind of ran out of stuff to talk about, and the last ten minutes crawled by. But Holden still deflated a little when Ostridge Beak announced that they could all turn in their cleaning supplies, collect their tech, and go home.

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Holden rode his bike as slowly as he could and took the long way. But eventually he got to his house. He left his bike in the garage next to his mom's Mercedes and headed inside through the mudroom.

In order to go upstairs, he had to get past his mom. She was sitting at the kitchen island, stirring a cup of tea and scrolling on her phone with a perfectly

manicured kitten-claw of a fingertip. With her long salon-waved hair and soft-focus makeup, she looked a lot younger than thirty-nine. The T-shirt she wore fit snug over her half-deflated soccer ball of a belly and said, YOU TOUCH MY BUMP, I PUNCH YOUR THROAT.

As Holden came in, she glanced up, sighed, and said, "Hi."

Holden muttered, "Hi."

She refocused on the phone. "I'm getting DoorDash. Do you want tacos?"

"Sure," Holden said, remembering Kelsey's miraculously home-cooked meal. And how they all sat together and talked while they ate it. His own mother barely even looked up when he got home.

Something heavy and hopeless settled over Holden. It was the exact opposite feeling of Sofia looking at him like a hero and girls flirting with him. It was scarier than the moment of dread when a potential fist bump could become a brush-off. It made him feel more worthless than taking a detention slip from a teacher who clearly thought he was a punk. And there was no Igo Big–inspired look to deflect it. Holden's only defense against the unbearable heaviness was a tattered, counterfeit indifference.

He dropped his backpack and started to cross the kitchen.

"Don't leave that there!" his mom snapped. "How many times have I told you?"

Holden shrugged, jaw clenched, and picked it up again.

"And leave your shoes outside. The cleaning people just did the floors."

Holden pulled off his Dunks and chucked them into the mudroom, before turning back into the kitchen. It felt pathetic to stomp across the granite tile in socks. But it didn't escape his mother's notice. She called after him, "Nice *attitude*!"

Holden dropped a few words he wouldn't say in front of Sofia, just loud enough for his mother to hear as he continued up the stairs. The last thing he heard before slamming his door was her scathing "Like father like son."

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Chapter 13
Maybe You CAN Please Everyone All the Time

"**Gotta run to the studio**. I'll be home by ten." Mom's hand on her shoulder made Sofia look up from her homework. "Make sure you get to bed early. It's a school night, and your developing brain needs lots of sleep." Sofia's mom planted a kiss on her hair. "Love you."

"Love you," Sofia mumbled back, returning to the math review packet she was trying to finish. She never didn't finish her homework. She wasn't the smartest person in any class, but she always got As and Bs just because she was such a people pleaser. Facing a teacher empty-handed would be on par with realizing your shirt was on backward all day—like, just admit you're bad at life and give up.

If Holden hadn't kept writing her notes all during math class, she'd have finished this packet at school. As it was, she'd been working on it for almost an hour. She couldn't be mad at him, though. He'd taken a detention for her. Who does that?!

The crunch of her mom's Hyundai backing out of the driveway sent a little shiver through Sofia. She wished she had ten brothers and sisters and three dogs —a huge German shepherd to guard the house, one puppy to carry around, and one more to follow her everywhere. She got up and checked the front door to make sure it was locked. Then she checked the back door.

Satisfied that she was safely locked in—although still thoroughly alone—Sofia proceeded to rifle through the cupboards looking for cookies. No luck. All she found was low-sugar homemade snacks. She could almost hear her mom saying, *These taste just as good and are way better for you.*

Blech.

A ding punctured the silence of the empty house, giving Sofia a jump scare. She took a calming breath before checking the phone.

Coach

sorry i couldn't hang out after school today

Sofia

I'M SORRY YOU GOT A DETENTION 😭

Coach

nbd - lol

The messages stopped for a full minute while Sofia wondered if she should text back, and if so, what she should say. She wanted to write, "It was literally the bravest thing anyone has ever done." But maybe that was too gushy? Nina would definitely say she was being too sweet. Maybe she should just drop an emoji.

Before she had made up her mind, Holden texted again.

Coach

whats up??

Sofia smiled. Holden could always carry the conversation when she got stuck. She texted back:

Sofia

just looking for a snack. I want cookies but my options are granola with raisins or almond-butter energy bites 😕

Coach

gross wth

Sofia

you met my mom! she's earthy 🤣😭 it's okay - I'm not even hungry 🙃 my mouth is just bored

Coach

🤣

Sofia settled onto the couch as the text exchange continued. Holden said her mom was awesome. She thanked him again for destroying the note. He suggested they go shopping after school the next day. Sofia agreed and then spent a long time trying to convince him that they should go to Goodwill instead of to the mall. Since she couldn't even kind of afford brand-new mall clothes, she insisted that thrifting was the cooler option. Even for thrifting, she'd have to ask her mom for money, which she already felt guilty about.

Holden told her about detention ("it was boring"), and then they talked about their friends coming back from ISS tomorrow. Holden let her gush about Mark and even asked her follow-up questions, which Sofia extra appreciated because her girlfriends pretty much shut her down whenever Mark came up lately. They were sick of hearing about her crush.

After a while—Sofia had honestly lost track of time—Holden wrote:

Coach

i guess i should let you get back to looking for cookies

Normally, Sofia would say okay and drop it, because who was she to argue if the other person wanted to be done texting? But between the dreadful emptiness of the house and how safe it felt to tell Holden whatever popped into her head, Sofia braved asking for what she wanted.

Sofia

can we talk a little longer?? 🥺 I'm home alone and i kind of hate it tbh 😈

Coach

r u scared of the dark?

Sofia

no

Yes. A little

But mostly I hate the quiet. It just feels like I'm cut off from everyone. Like I'm the only person on the planet. I know that's so weird 😭

Coach

not weird

I get it

His next text was a location share request on the KeepTabs247 app. She hesitated for only a second before accepting it. Immediately, a blinking dot named "Holden" appeared on her map.

Coach

now you can always find at least one person on the planet

She counted thirteen blocks between Holden's dot and hers. It did make her feel less alone. So did his unbroken string of texts. He sent her funny memes and video links. They traded "favorites"—food, pet, car, band, show.

The next thing she knew, it was ten o'clock. Her mom would be home any minute and, if she wasn't in bed, she'd probably lose her phone for a week.

Sofia

oh my gosh!! I have to go to bed! thanks for keeping me company 😊

Coach

good night, sleepyhead

It was a huge relief to be greeted by Destiny, Nina, Reese, and Eve in the cafeteria the next morning. Technically, Reese had never been gone. But they didn't have any classes together and, it turned out, they were the kind of friends that needed the rest of the group to hold them together.

All the girls hugged and talked over each other like they'd been tragically separated for years. Reese, who was the tallest of them all and seemed to see herself as the older sister of the group, made them hold still long enough to snap a group selfie. But the stillness broke the instant the camera clicked.

"Your hair!!" Destiny practically screamed, shaking Sofia by the shoulders. "Sof! It's so cool!" That meant a lot coming from Destiny, who was sporting teal braid extensions down to her butt—the kind only Black girls could pull off. She also wore glasses, massive earrings, and lots of lip gloss. One time Nina had said, "If she wasn't so nice, I would hate her." That's the level of coolness Destiny had attained.

Nina ruffled Sofia's bleached chunk. "I mean, what happened? You look so different!" Some people called Nina bossy, but in Sofia's mind she was an actual boss. Even her hair dominated. Nina's bulky black waves could beat up Sofia's wimpy hair any day of the week.

"I love it," Eve affirmed, rocking her standard no-fuss ponytail. Sofia had always thought Eve, with her light brown hair and green eyes, and her wardrobe of baggy T-shirts, was beautiful in a not-at-all-trying way.

It wasn't totally surprising that Eve and the others didn't know about the hair-transformation video, since they'd all been grounded from their phones. If she told them about the videos, would her friends be excited for her?

Sofia opened her mouth to tell them all about her and Holden's plan, but Nina was already on to a new topic. "Eve, tell everybody what happened with Andrew!"

Sofia deflated. What about *her* news? Then she instantly felt bad for being self-centered. Then she worried about Eve. Because *so much* had happened with Andrew. They'd been best friends since, like, forever. But this year everything had gone wrong. It had been one crisis after another.

Eve said, "Well, when I woke up on Sunday morning—"

Sofia missed the rest of the story, because she got distracted by Holden sauntering toward them. She waved to him, and he pretended to throw dice toward her. It was so goofy that she had to laugh—covering her mouth with her hand so as not to interrupt Eve's story.

With some hand motions and facial expressions, Holden telegraphed the message, *You—me—outside—after school.*

She gave him a thumbs-up. He gave her an angry coach look, mouthing, "No! Not fierce." Then he did a duck-lips face with V fingers.

She silently cracked up again.

Sofia saw a flash of a real smile from Holden just before a couple of band girls flanked him—one super bubbly and one kind of emo, but both wearing TEAM ANDREW shirts. He greeted them with his signature rizz face. Sofia watched, way more interested than she really should be.

"What. The. *Actual.*" Destiny adjusted her glasses like she couldn't believe what she'd seen. "Girl! Were you seriously just flirting with *Holden Thomas*?!"

"Uch." Nina pretended to gag.

"No," Sofia protested. "Not flirting. We're just friends."

"You are not allowed to be 'friends' with *Holden Thomas*." Destiny was adamant. "He's the actual worst."

"He's a skeezeball," Nina agreed.

Reese cleared her throat. "I wasn't sure if I should say anything. But did you guys see what Holden posted about Sofia?"

The group erupted.

"WHAT?!"

"Reese, you *follow* him??"

"Sofia! What did you do?!"

Sofia mentally scrambled for words that would change their minds about Holden. "No! We. I. He's really nice. He's helping me—"

Destiny held up her hand like *stop*. "Sofia, baby, you are way too sweet and trusting. That guy is *not* nice. He's *not* your friend."

"If he's being nice to you, the only person he wants to help is himself," Nina added.

Even Eve, who was usually a little less opinionated than Destiny and Nina, nodded vigorously. "He's gross, Sofia. Trust me."

"But—" Sofia was losing her nerve. She had never been good at standing up to her friends. They were so confident and smart and assertive. And obviously they had good reasons for giving her this advice. But if they just got to know Holden like she had...

"Didn't you date Holden, like, last summer?" Reese chimed in, looking pointedly at Destiny.

"Shut your face," Destiny said in a tone so murderous that it must have been playful. "Okay, yes. But that's how I know what a skeeze gremlin he is. Seriously, Sofia, run—don't walk—away. Red. Flags. Everywhere."

"The dice throw thing," Eve said. "Red flag."

"His last name is really a first name," Nina added. "HUGE red flag."

"He can't help his name," Sofia protested.

They ignored her.

"He was literally just flirting with three girls at once," Destiny pointed out.

"RED FLAG," Eve and Nina proclaimed in unison.

"Yeah, Claudette and Kylee," Reese added. "Jamal said that Arav told him that that's been going on for a couple of days."

"Are you guys back together?" Nina asked, not sounding thrilled.

Destiny rolled her eyes. "Here we go again."

But Sofia offered Reese a sympathetic smile. She honestly hoped—as she did every single time they broke up and got back together—that this time Reese and

Jamal would make it work. Sofia believed in true love, and she wanted her friends to be happy. She was also really glad they had all moved on from trying to convince her that Holden was the devil.

Holden was a good friend. She was sure of it. He was chivalrous when he walked her home in the dark. Generous when he paid for the hair dye and stuff. Good company when she was alone on *multiple* occasions. And he'd taken detention to save her from public humiliation. All the flexing and flirting was just the show he put on. That wasn't the real him.

But how could all her girlfriends be wrong? Maybe there was something she wasn't seeing. Plus, they'd be so mad if she ignored their *No Holden* rule and kept hanging out with him anyway.

On the other hand, she'd had a lot of fun with Holden the past few days. It felt like a loss to walk away from that. Not to mention that she needed his help to transform herself so Mark would fall for her. Besides, what could she do—ghost him? That was too mean. Every choice seemed like the wrong one.

Sofia had always felt like it was her job to make everyone happy. How in the world was she going to do that now?

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Chapter 14
It's Never That Serious

Holden had a hundred dollars burning a hole in his pocket. He'd found it on the counter with his name on it last night when he'd come down looking for food. His mom was paying him off, obviously. It was always the same—after playing verbal Fruit Ninja on his adolescent sense of self, she'd slap a money Band-Aid on the emotional wounds. He was used to it.

He bought stuff for everyone from the snack cart at lunch. Tylee and Claudette were first in line to get their share. Then they sat on either side of him at the lunch table. Tylee was overtly flirty, but he kind of enjoyed Claudette's dry sarcasm and eye rolls.

Even with both girls paying attention to him and all his basketball and band friends back at the table, his mind kept drifting back to Sofia. Where was she now—study hall? Was Mark there? Maybe he should buy her something. What did she like?

He remembered her looking for a cookie last night. Smiling to himself, he bought her a sleeve of Oreos on his way out of the cafeteria.

As soon as he got to study hall, he texted her.

hows ur day going??

There was no response. She was probably busy, with her friends back from purgatory. After a minute, he tapped out: **whats for lunch??** But two fishing questions in a row seemed a little too needy.

He deleted that and wrote: **say hey to destiny for me.** But then he thought better of it. He and Destiny had history. It was messy. She was still mad at him because, you know, reasons, and he didn't want to do anything to get Sofia sucked into it.

Finally, he settled on: **Any Mark updates?** Perfect. Asking about Chen made it obvious that he wasn't texting her because he liked her or anything. And crush-gushing was Sofia's favorite pastime, so she was sure to text back right away.

But before he finished the text, Mr. Wormlink's hand was in his face. "I'll take the phone, Mr. Thomas," he announced.

Holden instantly killed the screen. "I was just putting it away."

"Now."

"My grandma's really sick."

"PHONE."

"I have to make sure she's okay."

Wormlink looked utterly unconvinced. "You can check on her after the final bell, when you retrieve the contraband from the office. Or we can keep discussing it, and you can get the phone after detention."

With a groan, Holden powered off the phone and slapped it into Wormlink's palm. This sucked. Yesterday Worm Stink hadn't given a tiny turd that kids had their phones out.

Holden watched the second hand on the clock crawl past twelve a few times. When he couldn't stand the boredom anymore, he raised his hand. "Can I go to the bathroom?"

"The student handbook clearly states that passing periods are the appropriate time to use the restroom," Worm Stink droned, obviously on a power trip.

Holden spent the rest of study hall imagining unlikely revenge schemes. Just because the ISS kids were back, all the teachers had reverted to enforcing every rule like it was a gulag. Seriously, Russian labor camps were probably more fair than junior high.

His only consolation was that he'd see Sofia in math.

And he did. She was already at her desk when he got there. With zero explanation, he set the Oreos on her desk. She made the face women in jewelry commercials make when they get diamond rings. To keep it from getting too deep, he graced her with duck lips again, which made her laugh and bury her face in her arms.

But before he could tease her about the panda-paw pockets on her sweater, Jamal and Ramirez came in and started talking to him. He couldn't pass her

notes during class, either, because Katayama made them all sit in their assigned seats again.

As much as he'd been looking forward to everyone coming back, now he kind of hated it. All these people were killing the vibe.

Anyway, it didn't matter. He and Sofia were meeting up after school. He'd realized their shopping plan had a major flaw—they had no way to get to any stores. But they could go back to her house and shop online and plan their next video for Igo Big. Or they could just hang out.

💔 💔 💔

Last hour came, slowly but inevitably. And the band was *back*. It had only taken two days for Holden to get used to the quiet, so now he had to fight the dorky urge to cover his ears against the scales, drumrolls, and random blats—not to mention the shouted conversations as people tried to hear each other over the noise.

Holden swaggered to the percussion area, trumpet case swinging. Arav Kumari was once again flanked by the full drumline—Jamal Jones and Mateo Ramirez on snare, Andrew Ozdemir and Madison Streeter on quads, and half a dozen seventh graders on bass drums and cymbals. Except that instead of wearing their marching rigs, they all had cleaning supplies and were meticulously scrubbing neon paint off the instruments.

"Sup, my dudes?"

Ramirez offered his fist, and Holden bumped it. Jones and Kumari gave him high fives. Ozdemir glared at him, arms crossed. That guy officially hated his guts. Just because Holden had tried out a few Igo Big lines on his girlfriend (or whatever she was), they were now apparently mortal enemies. Holden grinned at him like he didn't notice the death stare.

Madison jabbed him with a mallet. "HOLDEN THOMAS. I cannot believe you got out of ISS. You NOOB."

He yelled back, "YOU GOT BUSTED AND I DIDN'T, SO WHO'S THE NOOB?" And then the band director yelled over all of them, telling them to take a seat.

Holden slid past the trombones to get to his spot. Deacon, the second chair trumpet player, was already there—sporting a fresh Afro fade and polishing his instrument. They exchanged chin bobs.

Once everyone was parked behind their music stands and relatively quiet, Mr. Handen said, "Today we officially begin concert season." There was a collective groan from the percussion section. Ignoring them, Handen passed out the concert music and announced they'd have to reaudition for their chairs next week. Holden and Deacon immediately side-eyed each other.

"First chair is mine, Holdo," Deacon said, when the director gave them three minutes to look over the music before they tried to play it for the first time.

"Dream on," Holden scoffed, instantly resolving to practice more.

"Face it." Deacon baited him, brandishing his trumpet. "All the great ones were Black. Louis Armstrong. Miles Davis. Dizzy Gillespie. I'm *destined* to knock you back a seat, Hellmann's."

Holden twiddled his trumpet keys, thinking about Chet Baker and Harry James—two virtuoso trumpet players who happened to be white. He could name them to prove Deacon was wrong, but not without simultaneously proving that he himself was a history nerd and a human tub of mayonnaise. It wasn't worth it. So he shrugged and said, "Good luck with that."

Actually, Holden had missed Deacon the past couple of days. Their rivalry made both of them work harder. Plus, Deacon was pretty funny.

As soon as band was over, Holden booked it to the office to get his phone back, dodging Tylee and Claudette when they tried to intercept him. He didn't have time for them right now. He was in a hurry to see Sofia.

The front desk lady took her sweet time getting Holden's property out of her desk drawer. Finally, phone in hand, Holden wove through the slow walkers to the front of the school where he and Sofia had met up before. He got there just in time to see her pink puffy jacket disappear into Destiny's mom's car.

It felt like getting sucker punched in the kidneys.

He reminded himself that she was like a kid sister.

That he didn't like her like that.

That she wasn't even cool.

But none of that made it hurt less, because Sofia was the nicest person he'd ever known, and even she bailed on him after four days. They'd had a plan, and she'd just ditched him without warning. Maybe it only took four days for her to see through him. To decide he was a selfish jerk and a poseur.

"Hiiiii, Holden," came Tylee's greeting close behind him.

Quickly, he pasted on a smirk before turning toward the sound. "Hey, Tylee," he said, with a chin bob. "Where's Claudette?"

Tylee pouted a little and shrugged, her wispy blond hair tangling in the wind. Behind her, Holden noticed Jamal's sometimes-girlfriend Reese watching him, her expression mirroring the gloomy gray clouds overhead. He turned his attention back to Tylee and verbally brushed aside his interest in Claudette. "I just always see you together."

Without offering additional intel, Tylee threaded her arm through Holden's. "What're you doing? Wanna hang out?"

He didn't want to be alone, that was for sure.

💔 💔 💔

Twenty minutes later Holden and Tylee wandered into the drugstore. The same one where he and Sofia had bought stuff to do her hair. But he wasn't going to think about that. He was just going to have fun with Tylee. They played with all the Christmas stocking stuffers that were already out and then read funny greeting cards to each other. He'd almost succeeded in forgetting about Sofia ditching him. Except that he hadn't. It stung again every time he remembered it, which was about five times a minute.

When the greeting cards weren't enough to distract him, he pulled out his phone to check his socials. The screen was black, and he realized he had never powered it back on after Worm Stink confiscated it. Once it booted up, a text from Sofia immediately popped up.

Sweet Sofia

I'M SO SORRY!!! I have to go home with Destiny 😭 Can we go shopping a different time? 😳 I'm really, really sorry.

It helped a little. She'd tried to tell him at least, and she felt bad about it. He wished he could tell what time she'd sent it. For some reason, that felt like it mattered.

He should text back, "Fierce girls don't apologize," but he didn't want to. He wanted her to feel bad for standing him up. But he didn't want her to know that she had the power to hurt him.

"What's up?" Tylee asked, leaning in close to look at his screen.

Holden gave the message a quick thumbs-up and clicked off the screen because it was none of Tylee's business. He wouldn't waste any more energy thinking about it.

"Look!" Tylee gushed the next instant. "Chocolate roses!" She plucked a pink-foil-wrapped bud on a long plastic stem from a display vase. "I thought they only had these for Valentine's Day."

"You want it?" Holden asked, because she obviously did.

"Really?" Tylee made an unconvincing attempt to seem surprised by the offer. "Oh my gosh, you're too nice."

Holden scooped up the entire bunch of roses and dumped them onto the checkout counter.

"Those are two-fifty *each*," the guy at the register said skeptically. He made no move to ring them up.

Holden—annoyed at the blatant ageism of this guy, who couldn't be more than a few years older than him—produced a fifty-dollar bill from his back pocket. "So?"

The guy shook his head like he didn't approve of Holden's money or his existence. But he sold him the candy.

One by one, the guy scanned all the roses, and Holden handed them to Tylee. When they left the store, she was beaming. She paused to post a selfie, hanging on to his arm and cuddling her bouquet. Then she proceeded to eat four

rosebuds while they wandered through the neighborhood—without offering him any.

"I saw that thing you posted with what's-her-name, Sophie?" Tylee said casually as she unwrapped another chocolate. "What's the deal with you two?"

For some reason the question felt intrusive. But he *had* posted it for the whole world to see, so it was too late to get touchy about it now. Holden jammed his hands into his pockets. "Igo Big is looking for mind-blowing glow ups. I figured nobody needs a glow up more than that girl."

He sounded like a jerk. But he wasn't about to tell Tylee that he'd been spending hours at Sofia's house and texting with her just because she was nice. By tomorrow the whole school would think they were dating. And he couldn't tell her that Sofia was doing this glow up to get Mark Chen to fall for her. He was ticked at her for blowing him off, but not so mad he wanted to trash her life. So the Igo Big part of the story was the only thing shareable.

Tylee sucked on her fingers. "Wow! It's like that one movie!"

"Yeah," he passively agreed. Holden had no idea what movie she was talking about. The only thing that came to his mind was the Greek myth about Pygmalion, which he wouldn't admit even if she pulled his teeth out one by one. Dude with a heckin' weird name falls in love with the girl he created. That was *not* what was happening with him and Sofia. Also, if anyone ever found out how much he knew about history and mythology and stuff, it would ruin his rep forever.

"So you guys aren't, like, a thing?"

Holden stopped walking, faced her, and quirked his eyebrows in a way that Igo Big told his followers meant *You're trippin'*.

She got the message, because she smile pouted and said, "Good."

The sunlight was fading fast, and the November chill was turning cold. Holden wished he had more than an athletic pullover, and he really wished he had gloves or something. His jeans pockets were not up to the job of keeping his hands warm. Starting tomorrow, he'd wear his leather jacket.

Tylee looked at the sky in annoyance and said, "I have to be home before dark."

"Okay," Holden said blandly, because he wasn't stopping her from leaving whenever she wanted. And also nobody cared what time he got home. Or if he got home. But he was getting too cold to stay out much longer.

Glancing around, he realized that if they turned left here and walked for two blocks, they'd be at Sofia's house. Not that he cared. It was just a random fact.

Tylee sighed dramatically. "I guess I thought you'd kiss me by now."

"Uh?!" Holden's wandering thoughts snapped back to the present. It's not like he was all sweet and innocent. But for some reason the thought of kissing Tylee hadn't even occurred to him. Maybe because his thoughts had been circling Sofia nonstop.

Cute little kid sister Sofia—so nice, it got annoying—who'd ditched him the second her real friends showed up. Dang it! He was doing it again! Holden scrambled for anything that could make him seem cool and confident right now—a look, a flirty comeback, a flexed-shoulder stance... *anything.*

But Tylee, who had found a tree to lean against, giggled. "Oh my gosh. It's not that serious." Then she grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him in.

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Chapter 15
Just Act Like It's Fine

As hazy morning sunlight filtered half-heartedly through her mom's car windows, Sofia chewed her lip and stared at the "thumbs-up" at the corner of yesterday's text. Was Holden mad at her?

She was a total flake for getting so swept up in making plans with Holden that she hadn't thought about the fact that she was *supposed* to get a ride home with Destiny—their moms had set it up at the beginning of the school year. They took her home every day (at least, every day that Destiny wasn't in ISS). In order to get out of it, she would have had to clear it with her mom and—more important—tell Destiny. After talking to her friends before school yesterday, she'd realized they would be furious if Sofia kept hanging out with Holden. So she couldn't explain to Destiny why she didn't need a ride.

Since she couldn't get out of her plans with Destiny, she had to cancel her plans with Holden. And since she didn't get a chance to talk to Holden in math, she'd texted him during passing period. But the thumbs-up that came hours later made it seem like he was not at all okay with the change of plans.

Up to this moment, Sofia's life theme had been "make everyone happy all the time." Her earliest memories were of her grandparents—no matter how upset they were—brightening when they saw her, their "little ray of sunshine." Growing up with a single mom, she'd made it her job to not ask for much, not cause trouble, and always be helpful. At school, she pleased her teachers and tried to be a good friend to everyone. She was the encourager, the optimist, the noncombatant.

But ever since the girls returned from ISS, it felt like there was no way to make everyone happy. She either had to back out of her deal with Holden or defy her friends. Disappoint him or make them mad. And what about her own

happiness? She wanted to transform herself—wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything—and she couldn't see any way to do that without Holden.

"Everything okay?" Mom asked, glancing at her and then refocusing on the road. "You look deep in thought."

Sofia and her mom always told each other everything. She trusted her mom to give her good advice. But they'd be at school in less than a minute. There just wasn't time for a full brain dump. Sofia tried to sum up the whole mess. "I made friends with someone, but the group doesn't want me to be friends with them."

"Ouch. Why?" Mom navigated the Hyundai into the line of cars dropping kids off.

Sofia shook her head. "I don't know, just *history*. Bad blood."

"Well," Mom ventured, "when in doubt, choose friendship."

The car inched forward. It was time for Sofia to get out and face Thursday. Out of habit she turned to face her mom before opening the door. Mom touched her forehead with two fingers and sent her off with the same thing she always said: "Be grateful. Be kind."

With a "Love you, Mom," Sofia got out of the car, joined the flow of students streaming into the building, and made her way to the cafeteria, where her friends were already huddled up.

As she maneuvered toward them, she scanned the room for Mark and found him playing some kind of hand-slap game with three volleyball girls. His smile lit up the whole room. And when he swept his hair away from his face, she was so mesmerized that she ran smack into a seventh-grade boy.

"Sorry!" she cried, completely ignoring Holden's fierce girl lesson. "I'm so, so sorry."

Mortified, she ducked her head and joined her friend group. Nina, Destiny, Reese, and Eve acknowledged her with "hey"s and "morning"s, and then went back to talking about how the online Team Eve verses Team Andrew battle was progressing. Apparently anti-Eve posts were getting way too many likes. Nina, Destiny, and Reese agreed that the internet hive mind was sexist.

Only Eve dissented. "Guys, can we talk about literally anything else? I was being a brat, and the internet will make sure I never forget it."

The group, including Sofia, loudly protested.

"You're a great person!"

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"We love you!"

"It's going to be okay."

"Besides," Nina announced, "pretty soon no one will care about Glow Night anymore. We've already started planning the winter dance, and it's going to be like the Met Gala and Six Flags had a baby!"

There were cheers and squees and hopping, all of which Sofia fully participated in while keeping Mark in her sight line.

The winter dance had been an annual tradition since their school was built in the 1960s or whenever. It used to be a girls-ask-guys event, so now, even though anyone could ask anyone (or no one, because you don't actually need a date to go to a dance), everyone still thought of it as girls-ask-guys. In fact, the asking part was way more important than the dance itself—it was basically a contest to see who could find the wackiest or most elaborate way to get a date. They called the asking part the Winter Clincher.

The dance was only for eighth graders, so they'd all been waiting two years for their turn to participate in the Winter Clincher. Sofia had been simultaneously dreaming about and dreading asking Mark since the seventh-grade slime lab. But now, with Holden helping her, she'd not only ask Mark to the dance, they'd be the happiest couple there. That is, *if* Holden was still helping her after the thumbs-up thing.

While the girls' conversation tumbled forward, Sofia had plenty of time to mull over her situation. "When in doubt, choose friendship," her mom had said. But what if choosing to be friends with Holden broke her friendship with Destiny and the girls? It felt like her mom's advice was just another way to say, *Make everyone happy.*

On the upside, it seemed like the girls—obsessed as they were with Eve and Andrew's drama—still hadn't noticed Sofia's own contribution to the annals of social media even though, last time Sofia had checked it, the spin transformation had more than seven hundred likes. And now the post was two days old. At this point, what were the chances that it would pop up in anyone's feed?

If the girls didn't follow @Holden_it_down, maybe she could keep hanging out with Holden and making videos with him, as long as she didn't tell them about it. What they didn't know couldn't bother them. Instead of walking home with him, she could meet up with him after Destiny dropped her off at home. She didn't have to lie. She could just not mention anything Holden adjacent.

But what about that thumbs-up? That niggled at her. The idea that anyone was mad at her was a splinter in her brain. She looked around for Holden. When she didn't see him in the cafeteria, she sneaked a peek at KeepTabs247. Holden's dot was blinking on the other side of the school, in the band room. But the dot couldn't tell her if he was crying or mad or laughing his head off. She would either have to go up to him and say, "Are you mad at me?"—which she obviously could not do since she'd rather be buried alive than directly confront someone—or she could wait for him to make a move, which was another kind of torture.

Or she could try texting again.

The five-minute bell rang, and Nina, as the group's unofficial leader, instructed, "We'd all better get to class." Just like that, the huddle broke up and moved toward the doors. As she kept pace with the other girls, Sofia shut down her phone and put it in her backpack—following the school's off-and-away policy again now that things were back to normal. She'd text Holden later. As soon as she could.

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A few hours later Sofia was back in the cafeteria. Destiny and Reese were at the lunch table, and Sofia was truly grateful not to be sitting alone. The memory of Holden sneaking out of study hall to keep her company on Tuesday rushed at her, and she wondered again if their friendship was okay. But she didn't have time to go into a full spiral, because Eve arrived with Madison Streeter. Sofia couldn't help gaping at Madison, with her spiky black-and-pink hair, her heavy black eyeliner, and her *triple*-pierced ears. To top it off—as if she could get any fiercer—Madison was the leader of the drumline.

"You guys know Madison, right?" Eve said before sliding onto the bench. "She's going to sit with us now, okay?"

"Of course!" Sofia said. "It would be an honor!"

Everyone laughed, and Sofia wanted to slide under the table.

Reese asked Destiny, "Can I have some of your fries?"

"It would be an *honor*," Destiny replied in a fake British accent, tipping her glasses to the end of her nose.

The girls cracked up again.

She knew her friends weren't trying to be mean. She just let too much stuff bother her, like Holden said. But knowing she was overreacting didn't stop every muscle in her body from tensing up.

The rest of the girls continued to laugh and talk and find reasons to say, "It would be an honor," while Sofia mostly stared at Mark and Ashlyn, three tables down, who also laughed and talked. Sofia desperately wished she could join the Laughing and Talking Club. What was wrong with her?

She wished Holden would sneak out of study hall and come cheer her up again.

As if she'd heard Sofia's thoughts, Reese sneered, *"Holden."*

"Where?" Sofia looked around hopefully. Maybe he did come. That would be so like him.

"I can't even with that guy." Destiny growled her standard response to hearing his name.

"Seriously," Eve agreed.

"What did he do now?" asked Madison dryly.

"You aren't going to believe it," Reese prefaced, keeping them all in suspense a little longer.

It made Sofia miserable when her friends trash-talked Holden. They might not know the truth, but she did. Even if he didn't want to be her friend anymore, she had to stand up for him.

"I think Holden's..." Sofia searched desperately for the right word. *Cool? Nice?* Those didn't begin to capture it. *Awesome?* No. They'd definitely think she was crushing on him. She anxiously rummaged through her memory of vocab

quizlets, searching for a word that meant "weirdly trying too hard on the outside but really a great person once you get to know him."

All the girls were looking at her expectantly. She had to say something. "He's like a burnt marshmallow," she said, disappointed by how timid it sounded and how random that simile was.

Still, it made an impact. Jaws dropped around the table.

After a shocked second Destiny said, "I'm genuinely worried about you." She took a hard pull of her chocolate milk. "You're taking the nice thing too far. Holden Thomas is no marshmallow. He's more like a Molotov cocktail."

"What's that?" Eve asked.

"A cheap way to blow yourself up."

Sofia spoke up again. "He's a *person*."

Reese—as the group's self-appointed relationship counselor—leaned toward her across the table, eyes searching. "Sofia? Be honest. Do you *like* Holden?"

"I... I...," Sofia stammered.

Why wasn't "NO" coming out of her mouth? Mark was her person forever, her perma-crush. Was she cheating on her future husband?

Okay, she had never even come close to dating Mark, so it wasn't technically possible to cheat on him. *But still.* Sofia believed in true love. She knew that she and Mark were supposed to be together. So even the possibility that she might like Holden felt like a betrayal of everything good and beautiful in the world. She felt dirty.

This wasn't happening. She didn't *like* Holden. They were just friends (friends having a blip). He knew she was ride-or-die for Mark, and he was good with it. Nothing weird or tense or romantic had ever happened between her and Holden. There was no reason to panic. She wasn't a cheating cheater. She wasn't falling for anyone else while she waited for her OTP to notice her.

The only reason she kept thinking about Holden today was because she felt bad about ditching him—not because she wanted to date him.

"No," Sofia said firmly. "Of course not. You know I like Mark."

"Good." Reese sat back as the whole table seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Because I'm pretty sure Holden's hooking up with that flute player Kylee."

"Tylee?" Madison corrected.

Reese nodded. “I saw them together yesterday when I was waiting for Jamal. It was gross.”

Sofia had a strange feeling of sorrow and disappointment. She crammed it down. Holden could date whoever he wanted.

“Ick. How does that walking loogie keep pulling girls?” Destiny grumbled, apparently with no memory of dating him herself just a few months ago.

Was she kidding? It was easy to see how anyone would crush on Holden. He was a great listener and really fun to hang out with. And, obviously, he was super good looking... if a person was into trendy blond hair, green eyes, and muscle definition. Which Sofia wasn’t. She liked Asian guys with long black hair and beautiful bone structure.

Picturing Mark helped her realize that, actually, it was a good thing that Holden was dating someone else. That would definitely eliminate any possibility of people thinking the wrong thing about them.

That thought gave her the courage to tell the group, “I *have* been hanging out with Holden. But it’s not what you think. He’s helping me with my glow up.” She swept her hair over her shoulder. “He did this.”

“Holden Thomas did your hair?” Eve said incredulously. “Like cut it and everything?”

“Yup. And he’s going to go shopping with me and help me get better clothes.”

“Girl. No!” Destiny protested. “*We* can do that with you. You don’t need Holden.”

“Yeah, no,” Reese agreed. Or disagreed? It was confusing.

Like this whole situation with Holden. And how hard it had become to keep everyone happy. And junior high in general. Sofia wasn’t just confused. She was *frustrated*. She wanted to not have to second-guess everything she did. She was tired of waiting for Mark to notice her. With Holden’s help, she’d started to get Mark’s attention—he’d said he liked her hair. She needed to keep fixing things, keep the momentum going. And to do that, she needed to spend more time with Holden without people judging her.

Eve shook her head. “What’s going on with you, Sofia? Your clothes are *fine*. And your hair was fine. No offense. It’s really cool now. I’m just saying, *you’re*

fine."

"I'm tired of being 'fine'! Fine is boring!" Sofia was surprised by her own ferocity. She could practically hear Coach Holden encouraging her to own it. She got even louder. "That's the old me. If you guys don't like the new me, that's—" She almost lost her nerve but forced out the rest. "That's a you problem!"

She'd done it! She'd stood up for herself and *not said sorry*.

It felt liberating.

It felt horrible.

Eve's mouth fell open. Sofia felt like she would get the same look if blood started pouring out of her eyes and ears—like, *You clearly need help, but also I'm scared to go near you.*

Madison leaned way back, her whole body shouting, *Leave me out of this.*

Destiny sat up straight and drew her head back like a cobra about to strike. "Oh, okay. I guess it's Shark Week."

Nina commanded, "Settle down. Go take your meds."

On the brink of bursting from too many emotions—like a balloon that someone overzealously inflated—Sofia stood, swept the remains of her lunch into her lunch bag, and stomped away. She'd stood up to her friends for the first time ever and gotten shot down harder than she ever could have imagined.

Heads turned to watch her reality-show-worthy exit. Even Mark looked up as she passed his table. They were all seeing her red-faced scowl. They'd all heard her get kicked out of her friend group. She knew it. Even her awesome hair couldn't make this better. She hadn't transformed—she'd crashed and burned.

She'd tried to act like a fierce girl, and it completely backfired. Instead of making everyone happy, she'd made exactly no one happy. So far she'd ditched her coach, betrayed her mother, told off her best friends, and gotten banished from the lunch table. And for what? She'd failed to get a single thing she wanted. Was this conflicted, guilt-ridden destroyer of relationships really the New Sofia?

Once she made it to the bathroom, she held on to the sink and took a few gulping breaths before digging out her phone and powering it on.

There was only one person who could help her untangle this. So she blew up his phone.

Sofia

holden!! i need help!!!

please answer even if you're mad at me

i did what you said and now all my friends hate me and i'm freaking out

idk what to do

Sofia stared at her phone and waited for a response. The screen went gray. Then black. And then it lit up again with a chirp.

Coach

come out of the bathroom

Sofia peeked out the door and found Holden leaning against the opposite wall. He didn't smile at her—not even a fake one—but he turned his phone screen toward her so that she could see a dot called Sofia blinking on his KeepTabs247 map. Then he said coolly, "What happened?"

She told him about her lunchroom crisis in one long run-on sentence, leaving out the whole conversation about him that led up to it and ending with an accusatory, "You *told* me to say that, and now everyone hates me."

"They don't hate you," Holden reassured her. A teacher turned the corner, and he smoothly switched gears. With a gesture toward the water fountain, he said, "Go ahead. You got here first."

Sofia realized this was their alibi, and obediently leaned in to drink the warm hose water from the crusty spigot. It was gross, but better than getting in trouble. She heard Holden behind her say, "Hello, Ms. Lim," in the most innocent and respectful voice anyone had ever used. A few seconds later he tapped her back. "All clear."

Sofia straightened, dashing the water off her chin and wiping it on her jeans.

Holden continued from where they left off. "They were just surprised because you never stood up for yourself before."

“Maybe I never will again. It was horrible,” Sofia whisper wailed. “What am I going to do?!”

“Stop being so dramatic,” Holden said firmly. “Next time you see them, just act like nothing happened. Like eighty percent of the time, everyone just goes with it.”

Sofia fidgeted. “Like we’re doing right now? About yesterday?”

Holden tipped his head slightly to the side, in a way that Sofia was pretty sure meant *You’re not wrong*.

Then the bell rang, people swarmed the hallway, and Holden merged into the foot traffic with a two-finger wave.

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Chapter 16
It's Not Fine. Nothing Is Fine.

When Holden woke up on Friday morning, it took him a full minute to figure out where he was. Finally, his half-awake brain fed him the information. He was in the guest bedroom at his dad's house. It shouldn't be *that* hard—he stayed at his dad's every other week from Thursday after school until Sunday morning. That was the custody agreement.

Holden stared at not-his-ceiling and thought about how ironic it was that both his parents had their lawyers on speed dial in case the other one was more than five minutes late picking him up or dropping him off. But neither of them wanted him while they had him. Exhibit A: waking up in the guest room. Apparently, his dad didn't want him to feel too at home.

There was pounding on the door. "Are you up?" called his stepmother, Crystyn-with-two-*y*'s. "We need to leave for school in twenty minutes."

Crystyn wasn't terrible. Holden just resented her for being his babysitter when his dad was—according to a legally binding court order—supposed to be parenting him.

He dragged himself out of bed and checked his phone. Twenty-seven texts from Tylee and one from Sofia. He opened Sofia's.

Sweet Sofia

hey coach ✺ u were right. i saw destiny after school and it was like nothing happened

Holden

always trust the coach, kid sis

Sweet Sofia

😂 thanks

i'm glad we're friends

His heart squeezed. He hadn't hung out with Sofia for three days now. Crystyn had picked him up right after school yesterday, so he hadn't gotten to hang out with *anyone*. And ever since they'd kissed on Wednesday, Tylee seemed to be on a mission to take up every waking moment with texting, calling, and clinging to him.

He kept telling himself that he was only hanging out with Sofia for the likes—so he could do the glow-up project with her and get a boost from Igo Big. But the truth was, he really missed her homey house and her mom's Crock-Pot cooking and texting for literally hours. He missed *her*. He analyzed her last text: "I'm glad we're friends." That meant she didn't just need him for her glow up, she also liked him as a person.

His own parents didn't even like him.

Almost as if she knew he wasn't thinking about her, a new text popped up from Tylee. He switched over to their convo and scrolled through her stream-of-consciousness ramblings.

"Fifteen minutes!" Crystyn shouted.

Holden swore and jumped out of bed.

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Fifteen minutes later, his hair still wet from the shower, Holden slid into his stepmom's Land Rover. Keiki the toy spaniel—who was in fact a real, though very small, dog—whined in her car seat, wiggling against the restraints. Holden scratched her ear.

"I can't even breathe, Holden. Lay off the cologne!" Crystyn complained from the driver's seat.

Keiki let fly a little doggie sneeze.

"See!" Crystyn said. "It's not good for the baby." Her voice switched to syrupy baby talk, "Poor sweet baby puppers. You don't like that yucky smell, do you? No, you don't."

I am literally worth less to my family than a dog, Holden thought bitterly. Also, only Crystyn-with-two-*y*'s would call Versace Eros a "yucky smell."

Willing himself not to react, he pulled out his phone to text Tylee. Or maybe Sofia. He'd left them both on read and hadn't completely decided who to text back first.

Crystyn cranked up her music.

He ended up texting neither of them. Instead, he read about plague doctors. Their beak masks were actually filled with herbs and spices because they thought the Black Death was transmitted via bad smells. Like the "doctors" themselves, the masks were completely useless of course. But at least they smelled good.

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After twenty long minutes of nonstop female power ballads, the Land Rover rolled up to the curb in front of the Lincoln Junior High School sign. There were still ten minutes before the first bell. Crystyn was punctual, he'd give her that. His feet hit the pavement the instant the car stopped moving, but she called him back before he could get away.

She held a rectangle of neatly folded cash out her window. "Here. Lunch money."

He took what turned out to be two twenties with a muttered "thanks." Then he walked toward the school.

Inside the double doors, Holden had a decision to make. He could go to the band room, like usual, where Tylee would be waiting. She was his girlfriend, after all. (He knew their status because she'd posted the picture of them with the chocolate roses, captioned: *sweetest boyfriend ever.* He wasn't that into her, but she'd said it herself—it wasn't that serious.)

Or he could go to the cafeteria, where Sofia's friends hung out. Maybe she'd be there.

He was halfway down the hall toward the cafeteria when his phone started buzzing with incoming texts.

Tylee

WHERE R U???

text me as soon as you get here!!

He put the phone back in his pocket and kept walking. He didn't want to think about it too hard. There'd be plenty of time to hang out with her after he said hi to Sofia.

The cafeteria was crowded. Holden stood on a bench to get a better view and spotted Sofia flanked by her friends. For the second time this week, the sight of her was a sucker punch.

She was wearing a Pearl Jam concert T-shirt and skater pants. Her fifth-grade clothes had vanished overnight. And she'd done it without him.

She smiled at something one of her friends was saying, and her nose crinkled. Holden didn't think it looked little kiddish anymore, though—not without the sparkly hair clips and cutesy sweaters.

Somebody called, "Sup, Holdo!" And Holden nodded toward the voice without even registering who it was. Sofia looked up just then and their eyes met. She blinked a couple of times and mouthed, "Are you okay?"

Holden realized his face was giving too much away. Quickly, he snapped back to a one hundred percent confident smirk. Sofia tilted her head and pursed her lips in a way that said, *That doesn't work on me*.

The room was way too crowded. He needed some air. He hopped off the bench and made for the door as fast as he could go while still maintaining his well-practiced swagger.

She can do whatever she wants, he told himself. Why should he care if she went and bought clothes without him? He was only ticked off because she'd promised to let him post the glow-up videos. And because she hadn't mentioned it. And because it felt like a repeat of Wednesday. He'd been a good guy and let

that slide, and maybe he shouldn't have. Because now it was a pattern. Apparently they were only friends when she needed him for something.

For someone who acted so nice, she could be a real backstabber.

His phone buzzed again. Tylee wanted to know where he was.

Holden found her in the band room, along with Deacon, the drumline guys, Yvonne the ex, and Claudette. He spent the few minutes before the warning bell being confident, charming, and carefree. And if Tylee was clingier than a wet T-shirt, well, at least she really liked him.

Holden kept up the Igo Big energy—like a suit of armor—during social studies, which Worm Stink kicked off with a stern reminder of the school's phones-off-and-away policy. Maybe Holden was imagining it, but it felt like the teacher was looking right at him when he said it. Then they had to take a test on state capitols, which Holden hadn't studied for. Whatever. He knew most of them anyway, and wrote in The Capitol for the ones he couldn't remember.

By second hour, pretending to be Igo Big was already getting tiring. As soon as the bell rang, Schmeckpepper announced that they were starting *Little Women*—a book that, clearly by the title, had no relevance to any guy's life whatsoever—and that they had to complete a worksheet about the first chapter by Monday.

Reading a boring girl-book was not how he wanted to spend his weekend. He traded sneers and snide whispers with the guys around him, until Schmeckpepper cut in sharply. "Mr. Thomas, see me after class."

When class ended and everyone else had fled the room, she gave him a long, disappointed look. "Holden, we got the standardized test scores from the state."

Geez, when had they taken those waste-of-time tests? Maybe the end of seventh grade. He'd honestly forgotten all about them.

"So?" he muttered. He just wanted to get this day over with.

"So, you scored in the ninety-fifth percentile for ELA."

Holden gave her a blank look, giving nothing away.

She leaned forward on her elbows. "And yet you never seem to have anything to contribute in class except smart-aleck comments and internet brain rot."

Holden took that as a compliment. He smirked in a self-congratulatory way.

Schmeckpepper rubbed her forehead like he was giving her a headache. "Why are you hiding your light under a bushel?"

"I'm not a nerd," Holden said, shifting to make sure there was nothing nerdy about how he was holding his books—in one hand, with his arm hanging loosely at his side. The bell rang, signaling that he had missed the whole passing period. "Can I go now?"

Schmeckpepper sighed heavily. With a disappointed shake of her head, she said, "Don't 'throw away so many good gifts because you can't have the one you want.' Louisa May Alcott." With that, she waved him out.

During World War II, the Germans shot flak at bomber planes instead of regular bullets. Flak were basically tiny bombs that exploded in the air and ripped through whatever happened to be nearby. Holden felt like he'd been taking flak ever since he woke up this morning. First from Crystyn, then from Sofia and his teachers. Now it was Schmeckpepper and her weird book quotes coming at him. His only defense was a rock-solid swagger.

But the flak had grazed his brain and exposed unwanted questions. What "gift" couldn't he have? A sitcom family? He'd given up on that a long time ago. A million followers? That was coming. Sofia?

Holden's swagger faltered. Sofia was a project. A kid sister. And he was kind of ticked at her right now. He shook the thought of her away and went to lunch.

Tylee and Claudette were already sitting at his regular lunch table with Brendan and the other basketball guys.

"Hiiiiii, Holden," Tylee greeted him, making room next to her on the bench. "I was worried! Where have you been?"

What he thought was, *Why are we even dating? Do you know one thing about me?* What he *said* was, "Schmeckpepper kept me after class."

"Why?"

"Just to ride me about class participation." He rolled his eyes and received several sympathy eye rolls in return.

He hoped they never found out more details about what Schmeckpepper was on him about. Teachers weren't allowed to share test scores, were they? There were HIPAA laws or something. Okay, those were for medical stuff, but he was pretty sure it was illegal.

Thankfully, Brendan turned the conversation to basketball, which was starting after school today. A much safer topic. "Coach said we're gonna run drills and scrimmages all this week. Then on Thursday he's going to choose our positions."

"It doesn't even matter, though. Nobody gets cut," said Pedro.

"Yeah," agreed Brendan, "but I don't want to sit on the bench all season."

Holden's lunch was a package of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. He tore open the wrapper.

"Ugh. You're never going to have time to hang out anymore because of stupid basketball," Tylee complained, elbowing him to try to get his attention. "Holden?!"

Holden offered the minimum required response, a noncommittal "Uh, yeah." His thoughts had circled back around to Sofia.

Her last text was still sitting on read: "I'm glad we're friends." But she hadn't said anything about her new clothes. They'd made all those plans, and then she went without him. Should he respond to her text anyway? Pretend nothing happened? Should he tell her he felt used?

"Um... Holden?" Sofia's soft voice interrupted his thoughts about her.

He whipped around way too fast to be cool. Igo Big would not approve.

"Hi." Her voice was tiny. The way it got when she was nervous. Her eyes darted to each person at the lunch table.

"Hey." Holden extricated himself from the bench, provoking a little huff of annoyance from Tylee. He ignored her and faced Sofia. "Aren't you supposed to be in study hall?"

She scrunched her nose. Did he have peanut butter breath?

Then she pointed with her eyes to a bathroom pass in her hand. He felt a swell of pride. She was taking a risk, being a little rebellious. He'd taught her that. And then he realized she'd risked getting in trouble to talk to *him*.

She did care about him.

Man, oh man, the mixed signals were no joke.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" She was so quiet, he had to lean in to hear her.

"Yeah," he said, moving toward the drinking fountains in the back of the cafeteria—the farthest away they could get from the noise and curious looks of a hundred hungry teenagers.

"Holden!" Tylee called after him. "What the heck?"

He said, "Just a minute." But what he thought was, *Get over yourself, Tylee.*

As soon as they had a little distance between them and his lunch crew, Sofia said, "Are we okay? Because you haven't texted me back, and when I saw you this morning, you looked..." She made a pained face. "I know I'm not supposed to say sorry. But I'm just worried about you, I guess, and I feel like you're mad at me but—"

"We're okay, Sof," Holden said. Saying it made it feel true. Maybe he was wrong about never apologizing and always pretending like problems hadn't happened. He had the urge to hug her, and shoved his hands into his pockets to make sure they didn't do anything weird. "I was just about to text you."

"Really?"

"No, I'm lying." Holden rolled his eyes.

"Anyway." Sofia shrugged. "I heard about you and Tylee. I'm really happy for you. It's sooo great that you found your person."

He wanted to say, *Tylee's not my person. She's just* a *person.*

But Sofia rushed on. "To be honest, my friends were kind of, ummmm, worried about you and me hanging out. I think they had the wrong idea, you know? But now it's fine! You have Tylee, and I have Mark, so obviously we're just friends."

Mark. He'd momentarily erased that guy from his head. That's what this whole thing was about for her. Which was totally fine and shouldn't bother him at all. *Didn't* bother him at all.

And her friends. *Destiny's* friends. That girl hated him. What must they be telling Sofia? No wonder she was hot and cold. He cleared his throat. "Is that why things have been kind of off since Wednesday—because of Destiny?"

Sofia studied her shoes and looked extremely uncomfortable for a dramatic pause, before squeaking out, "It's not Destiny's fault. She's just... overprotective, I guess. And I don't want her to be mad at me. But I still want to do the project together and everything. We just kind of have to keep it on the down-low."

That stung. A few days ago he'd been worried about people seeing him with Sofia. Now *she* wanted to be secret friends with *him*. He guessed he was "getting a taste of his own medicine." *It kinda burns going down,* thought Holden.

But he said, "Yeah, of course."

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Chapter 17
What Doesn't Kill You...

Holden was having one of those rare moments when his face was completely honest. He looked like he had something bitter in his mouth. Sofia wanted to say sorry a thousand times for making him feel bad. At the same time, she had the impulse to put her hand on his shoulder and say, *Can you tell me what you're feeling?*

No! She chided herself, *Don't be a middle-aged social worker.*

In the second it took to reign in all her not-fierce impulses, Holden's professional smirk snapped into place. "Obviously we can't be seen together," he scoffed. "You'd ruin my rep. No offense."

Sofia realized her mouth was open and snapped it closed. She was not allowed to be hurt by that comment when she was the one who had just said out loud with her mouth that they had to keep their relationship on the down-low. The tight feeling in her chest was probably a minor heart attack or a partially collapsed lung. Definitely not heartache.

"So, anyway," he said, nodding toward her shirt. "No more kind bees and panda paws."

Sofia looked down at her thrifted Pearl Jam shirt and wide-leg pants. She *felt* fierce in them. But they were also a reminder that she'd broken a promise to Holden—that he was pretending nothing had happened, when he had the right to be mad at her for going shopping with Destiny and her mom instead of him. But if he was willing to pretend it was nothing, then so was she. She put her hands in her pockets and her shoulders back, striking that pose that Holden always did. "Do you like my new vibe?"

"Yeah, you look sick." He underlined the word "sick" by dipping one eyebrow. "You look like a skater girl."

Sofia was starting to get antsy about how long she'd been gone on her fake bathroom break. And she was suspicious about why he was using one of his cool-guy faces on her again. But the words "skater girl" sparked her imagination. She pictured herself skateboarding down the street in her new clothes and almost swooned from her own fierceness. She sighed. "I wish I could skateboard."

Holden got a little taller. "I could teach you."

"Would that make a good post for Big Ego?" Sofia actually hoped it would, so she could accept Holden's lessons without feeling like a mooch.

"It's I. Go. Big. And probably not," Holden said. He gestured to her outfit. "This would though."

"Oh, yeah!" she agreed, with a not-fierce level of eagerness to please. "We can definitely make a video. I saved a couple of my old things. So just come over anytime."

"And we can skate a little."

Sofia scrunched her nose and shook her head. "I wish. No skateboard."

"Don't worry about it. I got you." He spread his hands in a nothing-up-his-sleeve kind of way. "You can borrow my old one."

The movement lit up his smartwatch, and for a split second, Sofia saw the numbers. With a gasp, she grabbed his wrist with both hands and twisted it to get a good look at the time. Only five minutes of study hall left. She panicked. "Oh my gosh! I have to get back to class! I'm going to get in trouble!"

She started to scurry away but stopped herself after a few steps. She was done being the kind of girl who *scurried*. And she was done being the girl who was ready to burst out crying if a teacher so much as frowned at her. Was it really the end of the world if she was gone from class for one more minute? Starting now, Sofia was a girl who knew what she wanted and went after it.

She spun around and faced Holden. "Meet me at my house after school today?"

Holden took a second too long to answer, and Sofia was about to say, *No pressure! Never mind!* But then he said, "I'm at my dad's right now. It's kind of far, and I don't have my skateboard there. How about Sunday?"

Sofia wanted to ask him about his dad, and why he didn't sound happy to be there, and probably twenty other questions that weren't the kind of things fierce girls said. She squashed all that down and said, "Sunday... sounds good. Just text me!"

She turned to leave again, this time beaming with excitement. She was going to learn to skateboard this weekend! It took a lot of self-discipline to stride back to class instead of skipping.

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Ten minutes later Sofia was back in the cafeteria for lunch. Destiny's mini backpack was sitting on their regular table when Sofia arrived. She sat down, uncomfortable at being back at the scene of yesterday's crime—even though she'd seen all the girls this morning, and nobody acted mad. Holden had been totally right—everyone seemed ready to give her a free pass, including him. She really did have the best friends in the world.

Eve and Madison appeared a minute later, with smiles and casual "hey"s. They got out their lunches and started eating.

Not even a little side-eye. Sofia relaxed.

The double relief of making up with Holden and her friends acting like her meltdown yesterday had never happened made her feel like she could float right off the bench. Visions of skateboarding danced in her head as she unwrapped her sprouted whole-grain veggie wrap.

Destiny's standard tray of french fries and chocolate milk landed hard next to her. Sofia, Eve, and Madison all looked up. Destiny had assumed her dramatic-news-delivery stance—hands on hips, eyes flashing. Reese stood next to her, arms crossed and lips pursed. Destiny thundered, "YOU. GUYS."

"Wha?" Eve said, mouth full, eyes wide.

"Ostridge Beak canceled the winter dance!"

"WHAT?!" Eve and Sofia both yelled. Madison looked quietly horrified.

Reese affirmed Destiny's news with a gloomy expression and a firm, "Nina told us. StuCo had a meeting during study hall and found out."

Madison said stoically, "Why is it canceled?"

Destiny shot a quick look at Eve, as she took her seat. “Because of our ‘conduct’ during Glow Night.”

Eve moaned and let her head fall onto the table. Sofia reached out and put her hand on her back. “Nobody blames you.”

“I do,” Destiny said.

“Nobody but Destiny blames you,” Sofia amended, which made Eve chuckle into the table.

After squeezing onto the bench between Destiny and Madison and crunching through a couple of nachos, Reese cocked her head and looked at Sofia. “Why do you look different?”

“It’s the new clothes,” Destiny answered for her. “Doesn’t she look amazing? I picked that out.”

“Do you even like Pearl Jam?” Madison challenged.

“Like that matters,” Destiny said.

The conversation continued to swirl around her without Sofia actually contributing. But that was okay. She was oscillating between grieving the loss of the Winter Clincher and wondering how hard it would be to do the thing where you flip the skateboard in the air and land on it.

“SOFIA!” Reese suddenly whisper screamed. “Don’t panic! Mark is looking right at you!”

Sofia’s pulse instantly ramped up like she’d been running a mile. She fought the urge to turn and gawk at him. “Oh my gosh! What should I do?!”

Destiny half turned her head, pretending to look for someone. “Yeah, he is. Ashlyn too. Pretty sure they’re talking about you. He is *noticing* the *glow uuuuup*!”

Eve said, “You should go over and say hi.”

Reese made a noise of disgust. “Too obvious.”

Eve tried again. “Go buy something, and say hi on your way past.”

“I’m not allowed to eat school food,” Sofia said. Her mom called school lunches “overprocessed pesticide soup.” Coach Holden in her head went, *Never tell anyone that. Not fierce.*

Destiny said, “Whatever. Get something from the vending machine.”

With incredible effort, Sofia managed not to say, *I'm DOUBLE not allowed to eat that.* She also didn't say, *I don't have any money.*

It took the girls most of the rest of lunch to convince her to make up a reason to walk past Mark's table and say hi to him. But eventually, between their threats and her own commitment to be The Girl Who Goes for What She Wants, Sofia worked up the courage to stand up and walk to the vending machine. She looked at all the snack options for a while, thinking only about trying not to make a fool of herself in front of Mark. Finally, pretending that she changed her mind, she turned and walked back toward her friends, who were egging her on in improvised sign language. Sofia veered left, taking an indirect route that was still plausible but went right past Mark's table.

Mark and Ashlyn weren't watching her approach. Ashlyn was snort laughing with another volleyball girl while Mark gargled apple juice. Just as she passed them, she took a deep breath, steeled herself, and blurted, "HI, MARK."

It was *way* too loud!

Mark choked and went into a coughing fit. Ashlyn laughed even harder, crossing her legs and clutching her stomach. The other girl leaned over the table and pounded Mark on the back, shooting Sofia an accusatory look.

In a panic, Sofia increased her pace dangerously close to a scurry, almost collapsing with relief when she was safely back at her own table.

"Well—" Destiny said. "That was a thing you did."

Reese added, "What was that? You didn't flip your hair or strut or *any* of the things we talked about."

Madison added, "You kind of screamed his name. We could hear you from here."

Destiny shook her head. "You almost made him choke to death."

Sofia buried her face in her arms. It didn't matter what she did with her clothes and hair. She was still awkward, shy Sofia. It was hopeless.

"Come on, you guys," Eve protested. Her voice turned reassuring as she patted Sofia's knee. "You did something scary, and you didn't die. That's not nothing. Next time, it'll be a little easier."

Next time?! Sofia never wanted to subject herself to that humiliation again. But then she thought about her plans with Holden. It was a spark of possibility

cutting through her misery. *Next time,* she thought, *I'll be on a skateboard.*

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Chapter 18
Tastes Like Dysfunction

It was really touch and go whether Holden would survive until Sunday.

First it seemed like Tylee might murder him. When he told her in band that he wanted to break up, she swung her flute at his face. He put his arm up, managing to save his teeth from being knocked out, but that made her even madder. She'd accused him of breaking her flute and then stalked off to trash-talk him to Yvonne and Claudette.

After school Jamal told a bunch of band kids that he'd heard from Reese that the winter dance had been canceled on account of the Glow Night shenanigans. The gloomy news was all anyone talked about outside while they waited to get picked up.

"That blows," said Claudette. Holden agreed.

"What is there to look forward to anymore?" Yvonne-the-ex wailed. Holden could think of one thing—skateboarding with Sofia on Sunday.

"Isn't it enough that we had to serve ISS?" Ramirez protested. Holden joined the general chorus of agreement.

Arav shrugged. "Probably no one was going to ask me anyway."

While Jamal and Ramirez ribbed Arav about having zero game, Holden considered his own prospects. There were still plenty of datable girls at school. But it was Sofia who appeared in his imagination, asking him to the dance.

Even if the winter dance wasn't canceled, she would have asked Mark. He knew that. But imaginary Sofia was relentless. *Will you go to the dance with me, Holden?* she said, looking at him like he was her hero. And then she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him.

Wait. WHAT?! He shocked his brain back to reality.

What was wrong with him? Major overactive hormone malfunction, obviously. That was all.

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At his dad's house, Holden faced a cutting-edge plant-based dinner with Crystyn-with-two-*y*'s and Keiki—who sat at the table and ate from a small dog bowl with her name engraved on it. There was something that looked like flatbread but tasted like cauliflower, topped with chunks of not-chicken in a not-cream sauce, accompanied by some sprigs of green stuff. It was all very trendy and completely gross. He really thought Crystyn might be trying to gag him to death.

She clearly didn't like it any more than he did. After picking at the entirely fake meal for a while, Crystyn stood and scraped her plate into the trash with a disgusted sound. Later, Holden was pretty sure he smelled White Castle sliders from the guest room. But she didn't offer him any. Holden wondered if it was possible to die from smelling fast food on an empty stomach. Death by burger deprivation.

He ate a party-sized bag of Doritos and managed to survive the night.

Saturday stretched on like a long waterboarding session. His dad appeared for a while—long enough for Crystyn to loudly complain that she had to drive Holden around and clean up after him when he wasn't even her kid, and for his dad to fire back that she didn't seem to mind spending his money and driving the Land Rover he'd bought for her. Then he poured himself a single-malt Scotch and disappeared into his man cave—which was a game room with a pool table and a movie theater in the finished basement. Holden wasn't allowed to go down there.

Holden tried to tune it all out by playing video games and practicing trumpet and watching Igo Big's latest posts and working out in his room. He texted a bunch with Sofia, mostly trading funny memes, bemoaning the loss of the Winter Clincher, and reassuring her that they'd skate on Sunday.

Holden wasn't even a hardcore skater. He only knew the basics—enough to not make a fool of himself and to get where he was going. He hoped Sofia

wouldn't be disappointed.

The thought of seeing Sofia again sustained him through the long silent car ride with his dad on Sunday morning. That, and Ozzy Osbourne's "Crazy Train" blasting in his AirPods.

Holden's mom was waiting for them in the driveway when they pulled in almost fifteen minutes after ten a.m. "I should drag you back to court," she threatened, loud enough for them to hear her through the closed car windows.

The thing is, Holden had been ready to go, sitting on the couch with his stuff packed at nine. His dad had gone to the gym, come home, taken a long shower, and then sat drinking coffee and looking at his phone until they were guaranteed to be late. Maybe if his mom didn't overreact, his dad wouldn't push her buttons on purpose. Or maybe his dad really was just a piece of poop, like his mom was shouting right now. Only she didn't say "poop."

"That's how you talk in front of my son?" Holden's dad shot back. "Aren't you just the mother of the year!"

Holden got out of the car and headed straight for the garage to find one of his skateboards. It took him a minute to unwedge it from behind his stepdad's golf bag. He tried to tune out the names his parents were calling each other. His dad's complaint about having to pay off his mother every month even though she had a new "lunch ticket." His mom's retort that "it's called child support," and it was the only thing he was good for.

Holden jumped on the board and took off down the street toward Sofia's house. His parents didn't stop fighting long enough to notice his escape. The last thing he heard was his mom threatening, "You have five seconds to get off this property before I call the police."

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"Holden!" Sofia threw open the door and greeted him like he was home from war or something. She even spread her arms like she was going to hug him. Holden was ready to drop the skateboard and give Sofia a hug she wouldn't forget. Not only had his adolescent brain been glitching with daydreams where

Sofia was in his arms, but he could actually really use a hug after the garbage weekend he'd had.

But she brought her hands back together and clapped instead, cheering for his arrival. So he flexed his arms and tightened his grip on the board.

"Hey." He tried to give her a cool half smile, but it faltered. He hadn't quite shaken off all the bitterness and backbiting from home yet.

Sofia's brows drew together. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Holden rolled the tension out of his shoulders. "Wanna skate?"

Sofia looked at him a little too intensely for a few more seconds before saying, "Yeah. For sure."

She slid on her puffy pink coat and joined him on the sidewalk.

Holden showed her how to step on the board, push off, and then turn her feet to riding position. She imitated him, but the board only went about five inches.

"Push off harder," he suggested.

She tried again and went flying off the back of the board, landing hard on her butt.

"Not *that* hard," Holden said, offering his hand to help her up. She took it, her hand warm in his.

With the smallest shift of his hand, he could weave his fingers through hers. The truth was, he wanted to do it.

But he didn't. Maybe because he didn't want to mess up their friendship with his standard three days of dating. Maybe because he knew she wasn't over Mark. Or maybe he wasn't quite ready to admit to himself that there was nothing standard about his feelings for Sofia. This was unexplored emotional territory.

Or maybe he did know what this was, and he knew that it always ended with lawyers and custody agreements and screaming matches in the driveway. It was hard to imagine his dad ever having feelings like this for his mom, though. Not when, on his way out the door, he'd told her she was the worst mistake he'd ever made.

Sofia stood, not more than a second after taking his hand, unaware that his brain was taking him all the way past senior prom to their wedding and their

inevitable divorce. She dropped his arm, twisting to look at the possible damage to her backside. "I'll be so sad if my new pants get ripped."

Holden gave an Igo Big eyebrow quirk. "Ready to try again?"

She gave him two thumbs-up and a determined soldier face. Holden casually returned the gesture, ignoring the fluttery feeling in his stomach.

Sofia's next try wasn't half bad, and she stayed on the board, which was good.

"Keep your legs bent!" Holden called after her.

"How do you steer this thing?!" Sofia called back, the second before she hit a crack in the sidewalk and went flying. She took two stumbling steps forwards before landing face-first in the dead autumn grass.

Holden jogged over and helped her up again. And again, he only had a moment to touch her before she broke contact. She brushed herself off, laughing. "I was picturing myself being way fiercer than this."

"Fierce girls don't eat grass," Holden teased.

As Sofia positioned the skateboard to try again, she said casually, "How's Tylee?"

Okay, that was out of the blue. Holden cleared his throat. "We, um. We broke up."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry!" Sofia paused with one foot on the skateboard, looking like she might genuinely cry.

"It's really fine," Holden said, hoping Sofia wouldn't think he was a total jerk as he admitted, "It was never that serious."

"Oh." Sofia pushed off, skated a few feet, and stopped. She repositioned the skateboard and came back.

"I've got an idea," she said, reaching for him. "I'm going to hold on to your arm. You just walk, and don't let me fall, okay? Let me just get the hang of staying on the board."

"Girl, chill," Holden teased, to make sure he didn't seem too happy about this plan. "If you want to feel my muscles, just say so."

She punched him. He could barely feel it through his jacket sleeve. But then she set her hand lightly on his forearm, and the gentle pressure put his whole body on high alert. *Don't be cringe,* he commanded himself, *Act natural.* He

started walking like a gentleman from olden times, with Sofia rolling along next to him.

Still casual, still focusing hard on staying vertical, she said, "You were at your dad's the past few days, right?"

Holden locked his eyes onto a wind chime three houses down. "Yeah."

"What's that like?"

He should call her out on sounding like a family therapist. Or he should tell her the truth. But all he could say was, "I don't know."

Sofia tried again. "Do you get along with your dad?"

Part of Holden wanted to tell Sofia everything, the whole crappy mess. The way nobody wanted him, but they used him to get at each other. The fact that everyone in his family hated everyone else. How sometimes he wished he could just disappear.

But a bigger part of him didn't want to fall apart in front of her. Didn't want to admit to anyone, even himself, that he was a screwed-up kid with two screwed-up families. That he felt like an orphan.

So he dropped his arm and let her momentum carry her away."Hey!" Sofia protested, as she sailed past him. After sidewalk surfing with her arms out for a few feet, she bailed and let the board roll on without her.

"Find your balance, rookie!" Holden teased.

"Yes, Coach." She laughed, jogging ahead to retrieve the board.

For the next hour Sofia practiced pushing off, positioning her feet, and keeping her knees bent. Holden showed her a backside kick turn, and she practiced that too.

Finally, Sofia said, "I'm cold and thirsty and hungry. Wanna take a break? And then we can make the next video?"

She bent to pick up the board—which only the nerdiest nonskater would be caught dead doing. Holden put his arm out to stop her.

"Like this," he said. He gave the board's tail a sharp down step, causing it to flip up and into his hand.

"Oh my gosh! That was so awesome!" Sofia cheered. "Can you teach me that next?"

“Sure,” Holden said. He loved Sofia’s unedited reactions. She was a human ego boost. He grinned.

Sofia’s eyes went full manga, and she clamped her hand over her heart. Maybe she was just overreacting to the stupid skateboard trick—and he *really* liked impressing her—but no. She was looking at him like he’d just had a breakthrough in therapy. “What?” Holden demanded, his cheeks heating.

“Oh. Sor— It’s just…” Sofia ducked her head and then lifted it again to meet his eyes. “It’s nice to see your smile. Your *real* smile.”

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Chapter 19
Did NOT See That Coming

Holden's smile disappeared as soon as she said it was nice. He looked... caught. Red splotches spread across his cheeks.

She'd embarrassed him. And now *she* was embarrassed. Only a middle-aged social worker trapped in a thirteen-year-old body would spend the whole morning trying to get someone to open up and thinking that all his cool-guy smiles were a smoke screen.

She clamped down on the *sorry* that wanted to burst out of her, turned, and marched herself to the house. *Don't scamper, don't apologize, don't be a social worker,* she silently lectured herself. She didn't dare meet his eyes, but she could feel Holden watching her as they shed their coats and shoes and headed to the kitchen.

Everything felt weird and intense. *It's blood sugar,* Sofia decided. *We just need a snack, and we'll be back to normal.*

"Want a drink?" She opened the fridge, and Holden looked over her shoulder at the contents. Sofia instantly realized she'd made another embarrassing mistake. This was not a normal fridge.

"What the *heck*?" Holden asked, incredulously. "Coconut water. Kombucha? Kefir? I don't even know what those are. And what is that green stuff? Don't you have any soda?"

Sofia turned and pleaded, "My mom is *sooo* weird. Please, *please* don't tell anyone."

Holden turned his attention from the drink options to Sofia's face. That's when she realized how close they were standing. She couldn't back up to a normal personal distance because the fridge was right behind her. Also, now that

his jacket was off, she got a whiff of how good he smelled. How was it possible for him to smell that good?

He was looking at her sincerely—like he was only thinking about her and not about doing something cool with his eyebrows or whatever. "Seriously?" he said. "*This* is the big thing you wouldn't want people to know about your homelife? That your mom is into health food?"

Sofia shrugged, struggling to keep her mind on what they were talking about and not get distracted by Holden's *boy*-ness. *Think about Mark,* she told herself sternly. *Mark's beautiful black hair and perfect smile. He probably smells like this, but even better.*

Holden didn't seem to be having any trouble focusing. Words poured out of him. "My mom and dad cussed each other out this morning because that's what they do *every time they see each other*. That was after my dad and his new wife got in a fight about who should have to deal with me when I'm at their house. Sofia, your mom actually loves you. She could put a severed hand in the fridge, and you'd still have it good."

A salvo is a burst of bullets or bombs all at once; it was one of their vocab words in English a few weeks ago. Holden's speech hit Sofia with an emotional salvo—guilt for being distracted, sorrow and horror for Holden's situation, relief that he was finally telling her what he'd been down about this morning, and a dark giggle about the severed hand thing. Her body's natural response to so many feelings at once was tears. She could feel her eyeballs getting ready to embarrass her by overflowing.

Too overwhelmed to come up with a better response, all Sofia could do was throw her arms around him.

She found herself engulfed in a hug, her face buried in his shoulder. She felt his deep exhale in her whole body. From inside the hug, she managed to say, "That must be so hard. I'm sorry you're dealing with that." He didn't respond, and she wasn't at all sure she'd said the right thing, so she tried again. "You can tell me anything, you know."

For a second he stayed quiet, holding her tight. Then he pulled back to look into her eyes. Sofia could see he wanted to say something else—something

important. She stepped back to give him space and waited for him to find the right words.

"Sofia," he started, then paused. "I—"

Her phone dinged from the counter. She ignored it. Whatever Holden needed to say was more important.

It dinged again. And again. What if there was an emergency?

With an apologetic look, she picked up the phone and then almost dropped it when she looked at the screen.

555-1994

hi sofia

it's mark

from school

"Oh my gosh, *oh my gosh! Oh. My. GOSH!!!*" Sofia bobbled the phone onto the counter and then held her palms out like *stay*. She was too shocked to think. "It's MARK! He's texting me!"

Holden threw his arms out and looked at the ceiling. "Now? Seriously?"

"Seriouslyyyyyyyyy!" Sofia tried some yoga panting to ground herself. First that unexpected hug with Holden and now a text from Mark?! It was like being on that carnival ride—The Zipper. "What do I say?"

Holden just looked at her.

"Tell me what to text back!"

With a heavy exhale, Holden ran a hand through his dark blond waves. "How about hi?"

Sofia typed it in. It didn't seem like enough. "Should I say that I'm so glad he texted me?"

"No, that's too much." Holden took a kombucha from the fridge, closed the door, and sat in one of the kitchen chairs.

"Should I ask how he got my number?"

"Nope. Just say hi." Holden sounded tired. Sofia realized it must be exhausting having to deal with her dumb questions and her impulses that seemed to swing between little-kid and middle-aged, with nothing in between.

She sent "hi."

Right away, Mark's typing bubbles popped up.

"He's writing something!" Sofia narrated.

Holden unscrewed the cap from his kombucha and took a swig. Then he dived for the sink, coughing and spitting. "What the heck is that?" he gasped, wiping his chin with his sleeve. "It's like fizzy, spicy vinegar. Why does that exist?"

"I know, right? It's so gross." She went back to staring at the blinking text bubbles, willing herself to focus on this new leap forward with her true love and to cast the ghost of Holden's closeness out of her mind. She had only been hugging a friend who was sad. Not cheating on Mark. She ought to be overjoyed that Mark had interrupted whatever that was. But what she actually felt was overwhelmed.

Overwhelmed is good too, though. That's probably how Cinderella felt at the ball and how brides feel at their weddings. Overwhelmed could just be happiness mixed with extreme surprise.

After a few seconds, Mark's message appeared.

555-1994

call?

Sofia screamed.

"Are you okay!" Holden threw his hands out, like he was ready to catch her if she fainted. Which she honestly might.

She bent over with her hands on her knees to get blood to her brain and, between gasping breaths, said, "He... wants to... call me." She held out the phone. "Text him. Please. I can't." Holden made a little growling noise, but he took the phone, and a second later she heard the *swoop* of the outgoing text. "What did you say?!"

Holden read back, "Anything for you, hot stuff."

"WHAT?! NONONONO!" Sofia snatched the phone in horror. The text just said **sure**. Relieved and indignant, she punched Holden in the arm full force.

"Almost felt that one," he teased, his practiced cool guy smirk back in place.

The phone rang and the screen proclaimed "Incoming video call."

"Do you want me to answer it?" Holden offered, all cheek. "Pretend to be you?"

Sofia gave him a warning look. Before touching accept call, she quickly finger combed her hair and took the kind of bracing gulp of air you need at the top of a waterslide. Then Mark's face filled the screen.

"Hi, Sofia," he said. His hair was loose around his face and he was wearing glasses, which she'd never seen him wear at school. He looked studious and gorgeous, like Clark Freaking Kent.

Holden snapped his fingers. When she glanced up, he made a puppet talking motion with his hand. She had to stop gazing at Mark and start saying words!

In a rush, Sofia said, "Hi, Mark."

"What are you up to?" Mark asked.

"Uuh." Sofia couldn't think of a single thing she'd done all day up to this moment. She wasn't even sure what day it was. She said, "Nothing."

"Cool." Mark shifted and, for a moment, looked like he'd run out of things to say.

Behind the phone, Holden held out both hands and made a *What the heck* face.

Mark spoke again. "Your hair looks cool."

Sofia wanted to say, *It's not as cool as yours! Your hair is amazing!* But Holden was repeatedly mouthing "THANK YOU." And he had been very firm on the fierce girl protocol for compliments. So she said, "Thank you." Then, because she couldn't help herself, she blurted, "I like your glasses!"

Holden rubbed his forehead.

"Oh, thanks," Mark said, touching the frames like he'd forgotten they were there. "I usually wear contacts for school, but." He shrugged with his face. "Anyway, did you do the English worksheet yet?"

It took Sofia's brain a second to relay the information: a worksheet is a type of homework—homework is something teachers assign—the English teacher is

Mrs. Schmeckpepper—Mrs. Schmeckpepper assigned a worksheet covering the first chapter of the book *Little Women*. "Oh, um, yeah," she said.

Holden rolled his eyes.

Mark touched his glasses again. "Can you help me with it? Like, 'Where is their father?' It doesn't actually say."

Sofia was elated. Mark—probably the smartest guy in school—needed help with an assignment, and he thought of *her*.

But Holden was chopping the air with his hand in a way that clearly meant *Cut this off*.

"Can you hold on a sec?" Sofia muted the call and put the phone face down on the counter. She had to get the worksheet out of her backpack, which was by the front door.

Holden followed her, declaring, "He just wants to cheat off you."

"That's not nice," Sofia said. It was pretty unfair of Holden to assume the worst. "He's really smart, so he doesn't need to cheat."

Holden stepped in front of her, blocking her access to her backpack and forcing her to face him. So close she could smell his cologne again, which made her remember his hug.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Just because he gets decent grades doesn't automatically mean he's honest. Or smart."

Was he seriously accusing Mark of being a liar? Where was this coming from all the sudden? Sofia crossed her arms too, mirroring Holden's defensive stance, and insisted, "I think it's really sweet that he's willing to ask for help, and that he thinks of me like that."

"Don't be naïve," Holden shot back. "He *obviously* didn't read the chapter, and he wants your answers."

The words stabbed Sofia right where her greatest longing met her worst fear. Holden clearly thought that it was impossible for her crush to be interested in her. Her hurt morphed into anger, which made it easier to push away any last cobwebs of confusing feelings about the boy in front of her. "Why are you ruining this moment for me? *Mark called me.* This is what I've been dreaming of!"

"Don't you think he knows that? He'd have to be a zombie not to notice how you swoon all over him." Holden's voice was getting louder and angrier. "That's why he's trying to use you."

"Why are you being so mean?! I thought we were friends!"

"I'm trying to—" Holden cut himself off with a bitter "GAH!" He shook his head, and said with quiet, seething frustration, "You know what? Do whatever you want. I gotta dip."

He brushed past her, snatching his leather jacket off the futon, and slammed through the front door. Sofia was stunned. She swiped tears from her cheeks, thinking maybe she should run after him and say sorry... until she heard a faint "Hello?" from the kitchen.

Mark was still waiting!

She pulled out her English folder, found the completed worksheet right in front, dived on the phone, and unmuted it. "I'm so sorry! I had to get the worksheet out and, yeah."

"Are you okay?" Mark's voice was tender with concern. "You look like you were crying."

She wanted to yell down the street, *See, Holden! Mark REALLY cares about me! Unlike you!* But what she needed to do was focus on the love of her life on the phone and forget about Holden for the moment. She grabbed a dish towel and used it to wipe off any residual tears.

"Crying? No. I just. I got something in my eye. I'm fine!" Then, to move the conversation away from her humiliating overactive tear ducts, she said, "Anyway, the worksheet... um, their dad is a soldier and it's, I think, the Civil War?"

"Oh, okay." Mark ducked his head and wrote that down. Then he read the next question.

They stayed on the call for ten more minutes. And Mark seemed to struggle with every question, which was weird because Sofia was sure he was a straight A student. That was one of the things she loved about him—no matter what Holden said.

By question five, she had the thought that Mark *was* getting all the answers from her. Was it possible he really hadn't read the chapter—because of a family emergency or something?

"Thanks so much for walking me through this," Mark said, looking right at her through the phone, the sincerity in his eyes piercing her soul. "You know, I think it's just hard to follow because of the old-fashioned writing and all the characters. I can't keep them all straight. But you are so smart, Sofia."

Her "thanks" was barely audible. Her heart felt like it was about to burst, and she was fine with that. She could die happy right now. How could she have doubted her Mark? He was smart and honest and humble. Besides, he could just as easily get the answers from AI or from anyone else in class. But he'd chosen Sofia. They had a connection.

It never would have occurred to her that he might cheat off her answers if Holden hadn't poisoned her mind.

They went through the rest of the worksheet, and then talked for a few more minutes about English class and the canceled dance and the upcoming basketball tryouts. Sofia subtly snapped a few screenshots while they talked—just to have something to remember this by. Finally, Mark said, "Okay, well, I'll see you at school. Thanks again, by the way. You're awesome!"

As the screen went dark, Sofia squealed into the empty room. She spun in circles, clutching the phone to her pounding heart. Mark Chen said she was awesome! She wanted to tell somebody all about the call and that finally, *finally*, the stars were aligning for her and Mark.

She could call Destiny or the other girls. But the person she most wanted to tell had stormed out of the house because he thought she was naïve for believing that Mark might actually like her.

Sofia refused to let that ruin this moment. She strode to the front door and locked it. Then she pulled up a screenshot and gazed at Mark again.

It doesn't matter what Holden Thomas thinks, she assured herself. Mark Chen thought she was awesome.

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Chapter 20
Pretend That Didn't Happen

Holden tore down the street, every furious word he knew pouring out of him. Sofia asked for his help and then acted like he was a jerk when he told her the truth. Mark was using Sofia, and she was happy about it. How could she not see that the right guy would treat her better than that? That *Holden* would treat her better. And what was with that timing? Mark texted at the exact moment Holden was going to tell Sofia that he liked her. As more than a friend. Really, really liked her.

God was a jerk, obviously. Holden hated everything. He wanted to burn down the world. He settled for punching a tree. Even though he wasn't stupid enough to bare-knuckle punch it—he hit it with the side of his fist—it still hurt a heck ton worse than that *Ten Rings* movie made it look.

Holden held his throbbing, scraped, and bleeding fist, and swore again. At least the pain gave him something to focus on. He wiped the blood on his jeans and looked at the damage. Then he dug a piece of bark out of one of the deeper scrapes. By the time he'd finished giving himself caveman first aid, he was much calmer. Introspective, even.

He shoved his fists into his jacket pockets and walked on.

The problem was, rage was just the cover for feelings that hurt way worse. Rejection and sadness and longing and some that Holden couldn't even name.

He wasn't really mad at Sofia. He couldn't blame her for having a crush on the guy she had always had a crush on. Or for being nice and thinking everyone's motives were as pure and sweet as hers.

Mark wasn't the real problem either. Until about twenty minutes ago, Holden had never had a problem with Mark. Now he was a little ticked at him.

But wouldn't Holden have done the same thing a month ago? A week ago? Mark just saw an opportunity, and he took it.

That just left God. And himself.

Holden didn't like himself at all right now. His mom was right—he was just like his dad. He was one hundred percent selfish. He had lived his whole life like he was the center of the universe. Everything, *everything* was about him at all times. His needs. His wants. His image. He went through girls like they were disposable. If he wasn't completely satisfied or he thought he could do better, he threw them away.

And now he'd stormed out on Sofia. Left her crying in an empty house, like his dad had left him.

He wanted to cry too, but tears wouldn't come. He wanted to get away from himself, but there was no way.

"God," he finally said, hoping Somebody was listening. "I don't want to be like him."

God didn't answer. The clouds didn't part with heavenly light. The steam from his breath dissipated into thin air.

It's up to you, Holden told himself, *to make it right with her. Don't screw it up.*

Holden's feet were taking him closer and closer to his house. He didn't want to be there. But the cold was seeping through his shoes and gnawing at his ears. He veered toward the school. It was Sunday but maybe, if he was lucky, there would be a cleaning crew or a teachers' meeting or something that would cause the doors to be unlocked.

While he walked, he thought about how to make things right with Sofia. What would a not-selfish person say or do?

He would care more about Sofia than himself.

Her feelings would be more important than his.

He would choose her happiness over his own.

Holden didn't think he was strong enough to be *that* unselfish. Not his first time out. Maybe he could start by saving a bird with a broken wing or something and work his way up to the next-level good guy life. He scanned the sidewalk for baby birds, but November didn't seem to be bird season.

The school parking lot was full of cars. When he got closer, he saw an A-frame sign by the gym door advertising The Rock Church.

Dwayne Johnson cult, Holden thought to himself. But he sneaked in anyway. It was warm inside, the lights were low, and there was a live band on the other side of the gym blasting music so loud, it made Holden's eyeballs rattle. Hundreds of people sang along, clapping and rocking and raising their arms. No one paid any attention to the new kid.

He slumped into a seat in the back row and contemplated his phone screen. Just for kicks, he took a selfie. He chuckled to himself, feeling like kind of a baddie for sneaking in someplace he wasn't supposed to be. This was probably what if felt like to crash a wedding or rob a bank. Being here, a stowaway, made Holden feel bold.

The people were singing about "unfailing love." As the song vibrated through him, it made him want to be like that for Sofia. Unfailing. Loving. He still thought Mark was using her. But even if he was right, that's not what she wanted to hear. So what could he say that was true *and* didn't hurt her?

After a lot of mental retakes, he texted:

I shouldn't have said that about mark

he would have to be an idiot not to like you

He thought Mark probably *was* an idiot. He was using Sofia, no doubt about it. Holden's only regret was that he'd handled it wrong. But there was no point in ruining a good apology by restarting the fight. If she didn't want to hear the truth about Chen, then he'd keep it to himself.

He watched the screen, waiting for a text back. Was she going to ghost him? He probably deserved it this time.

The band started playing quieter, while some woman talked over the music about how, no matter what happens, God will never forsake us. *Who talks like that?* Holden wondered. *What does "forsake" even mean?*

His phone rang, shattering the contemplative atmosphere and earning him several annoyed glances and one understanding smile from an old lady. The

screen said: “Incoming Video Call from Sweet Sofia.” “Sorry,” he mouthed guiltily, silencing the phone.

He jogged, doubled over, out the gym door and answered the call on the sixth ring. Sofia appeared on the screen. “Thank you for saying that,” she said. “Can we pretend that fight never happened?”

“Sure,” Holden said, even though the stack of things on the “didn’t happen” pile was getting precariously tall.

“Okay, and can I tell you about the call?!” Sofia seemed relieved and giddy.

The last thing he wanted was to hear more about that stinking call. But he mustered his inner good guy and said, “Sure.”

Holden did laps around the school while Sofia gave him a minute-by-minute breakdown that must have been longer than the call itself. His opinion of Mark got lower every minute, but he forced himself not to mention it. He just tried to focus on affirming her feelings and not being selfish. It legit sucked.

By the time Sofia had talked herself out, the sun was getting low, and he was cold, exhausted, and hungry. There was nothing left to do but go home.

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Chapter 21
Not At All Awesome

After just one lesson, Sofia's skateboarding skills weren't *quite* good enough to get her to school. *Yet.* Her mom drove her like usual. But even without the skateboard, Sofia was sure this was the day she'd been waiting for. After telling her she was *awesome* yesterday, Mark would look at her differently today.

This was the beginning.

She wanted to gush about it to all the girls before school, but they were already squealing about something else when she got to the cafeteria.

Destiny's long teal braids swung wildly and her glasses bounced on her face as she jumped up and down, holding Nina by the shoulders. "Nina! You're an icon! Are you kidding?!"

Reese grabbed Nina from behind and shook her. "This is the *best* news!"

"What's going on?" Sofia asked.

"The winter dance is uncanceled!" Destiny exclaimed.

"We petitioned Oosterbeek to let us have it. But," Nina added, "only people who come to a school workday next Saturday are eligible to buy tickets. He said we have to 'show our commitment to good citizenship.'"

"Now I have to get back with Jamal so I can ask him to the dance." Reese sounded more like a war strategist than a teenager in love.

"I'm going to ask Arav," Destiny declared.

Reese and Nina paused to stare at her expectantly. The mood shifted instantly from surprise party to confession booth.

Destiny shrugged. "He lent me a pencil yesterday and it was *very classy*. A Kuru Toga. You have to admire a guy with good taste in pencils."

"No, I don't," Nina deadpanned. She'd dated Brendan for a couple of weeks at the beginning of the school year. She'd been in a boy-hating phase ever since

they broke up.

"I'm going to ask Mark!" Sofia blurted out. If she held in her life-changing Mark news for another second, she might have an aneurysm.

Her friends' responses were less enthusiastic than she'd hoped for. Behind her glasses, Destiny rolled her eyes so hard that she might've sprained them. Nina raised her brows skeptically and pursed her lips. Reese gave an incredulous laugh.

Sofia didn't totally blame them. A few days ago she would have been terrified to ask Mark to the winter dance. But that was before he'd said, "You're awesome." Everything was different now. She rushed to explain. "He called me, and we talked on the phone for a *while* last night, and he said he likes my hair and that I'm smart and awesome."

Reese went, "WHOA."

Nina conceded, "Mark seems decent, for a boy. I mean, I don't really *know* him."

Destiny shook Sofia by the shoulders. "How did you not text us all this *last night*?!"

Sofia couldn't answer because her teeth were getting rattled. And she couldn't tell them she'd talked to Holden instead.

Reese squeezed herself between Destiny and Sofia, turning the shakedown into a group hug. "The point is, he called. And *ohmygosh he LIKES YOU*!"

They squeed and hopped together. Her friends' approval was just what she needed to confirm that Mark really was her One and Only. And she and Holden had made up and were back to being good friends. So now she could put the weirdness from yesterday behind her and fully embrace her destiny—to be the fierce girl of Mark's dreams.

When the group hug broke apart, Sofia noticed someone was missing. "Where's Eve?" she asked.

"Band room," Nina said authoritatively. "Band finds out their chairs today, and everybody's stressed out, so she's providing moral support for Andrew and Madison."

Sofia didn't know what "finding out chairs" meant, but it sounded like it was a big deal in band. She wondered if Holden needed moral support.

As she cast around—trying to decide if she should find Holden or text him or something—she noticed Mark walking in. He looked especially beautiful today in a red hoodie, with the top part of his hair in a ponytail.

Her first impulse was to hide behind Destiny. That's what Old Sofia would do. Instead, she gave herself a pep talk. *You don't have to ask him right now. You're just going to go over there and say hi. Tell him red is his color. He thinks you're awesome, right? And you can always tell him you're on your way to talk to Holden, so it doesn't seem like you were only going over there for him.*

The pep talk worked. Thinking of it as a stop on her way to finding Holden made it a million times less awkward. Her feet started moving.

"Where are you going?" Destiny asked.

"To talk to Mark." She left out the Holden part, of course.

After a stunned microsecond, her friends rallied.

"Go get it, girl!" Nina cheered.

"Werk!" Reese yelled, embarrassingly loud.

Their support completely backfired, making Sofia exponentially more nervous. But she swallowed back the mammoth mutant butterflies in her stomach and focused on Mark's declaration: "You're awesome."

That gave her the courage to chart a course toward him. She didn't want a repeat of the too-loud "hi" from the other day. She needed to wait until she was close enough and keep it casual.

But she suddenly wasn't sure of the exact right distance to greet someone. The butterflies went into attack mode.

What if she threw up on Mark? She'd die instantly.

She was six feet away. That was too far. Or was it?

She was two arm's lengths away. Should she say it now?

Three more steps and she'd be past him. He hadn't even noticed her, because he was miming shooting a basketball toward someone behind her. It was now or never. She said, "Hi, Mark!"

Mark looked like she had appeared out of nowhere. He said, "Oh. Hey." And then his focus shifted back behind her as someone else said his name. Sofia couldn't help turning her head to watch him, but then regretted it when she saw him double high-five Ashlyn.

Ashlyn's smile was dazzling. Her teeth were so white, and her lips were so glossy. Her eyes sparkled too—her eyelids shimmered rose gold when she blinked lashes heavy with mascara. No wonder Mark could barely look away from her long enough to say hi to Sofia.

She tried not to scamper. She did. But Sofia fled the cafeteria as fast as she could, and there honestly might have been some scampering involved. When she got to the safety of the hallway, she leaned against the wall and focused on breathing for a minute.

Her mom would tell her not to surrender to negativity. And she tried not to. But her thoughts swirled like one of those puddles made of melted snow, road grit, grease, and garbage. *He didn't even stop! He barely noticed you from three feet away. Mark could never like you—everyone else but you could see that.*

Once the butterflies settled down from frenzy to flutter, she took out her phone and put it in selfie mode. Just to see.

She was plain. Forgettable. Boring. Her bare face didn't sparkle. Her lips and eyes didn't tantalize. She'd changed her hair and clothes, but she still had the same old baby face. Transformation definitely *not* complete.

Sofia lost track of how much time she spent critiquing her face in that selfie screen. By the time the five-minute bell rang, she had identified that her nose was too flat on the end, her brown eyes were dull, her cheeks were too round, and a pimple was taking over her entire chin.

As clumps of people began emerging from the cafeteria, she felt every pair of eyes judging her—noticing how ugly she was. Probably wondering why she didn't put a little more effort in.

She put her head down, letting her hair hide most of her face, and went to class.

She'd completely forgotten about Holden.

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"You look bummed," Madison commented almost the moment she arrived at the lunch table, hours later. "What's the matter?"

Destiny and Reese were in the hot-lunch line, and Eve was sitting at Andrew's table today. So for the moment Sofia and Madison had the table to themselves.

Madison looked especially punk rock today. Her black eyeliner was extra thick. Her lips and eyelids were the same shade of dark pink as the tips of her hair. There was a yellow star sticker on the side of her nose that was kind of giving nose-piercing vibes. She was peeling a clementine without even looking at it, waiting for Sofia to answer.

"Can you teach me how to do that?" Sofia asked, mesmerized by her black-painted fingernails.

"This?" Madison asked, looking at her fruit. "You don't know how to peel an orange?"

"No. *That.*" Sofia waved her hand around her own repulsive face. She could feel her pimple glowing red under the fluorescent lights. "Makeup and stuff."

"Sure." Madison popped a section of orange into her mouth. Destiny and Reese arrived then with their trays, deep in a heated conversation about a concert they were both begging their parents for tickets to.

Madison leaned over and whispered, "I have makeup in my bag. You wanna go to the bathroom and put some on now?"

Sofia nodded eagerly.

Five minutes later Sofia was sitting on the edge of the sink with her eyes closed while Madison coated them in black and pink. She now had a yellow star stuck to her pimple.

"It makes it go away faster," Madison promised, as she scribbled aggressively on Sofia's eyelids. Then she pulled out a tube of mascara and said, "Look up."

Sofia hesitated. Her mom was always talking about the terrible chemicals in everything. "Is this the kind with endocrine disruptors?" Sofia asked.

"Huh?" Madison looked at her like she was speaking Portuguese. "The what?"

Well, that was embarrassing.

"Never mind. Sorry." Sofia held tight to the counter's edge and screwed her eyes up toward the ceiling. "Sorry, you're right. Go ahead."

She tried to hold very still while Madison brushed the wand against her lashes.

But when she tried to get the corners, Sofia flinched. The wand poked her eyeball, and she reflexively squeezed her eyes shut.

"You smeared it!" Madison scolded.

"Sorry!" Sofia blinked against the pain and the tears.

"You're making it worse!"

"I'm sorry!"

Sofia twisted to reach the paper towel dispenser... and got a good look at herself in the mirror.

Madison had coated the area all around Sofia's eyes with a double-thick layer of magenta. The eyeliner was in thick crescents under her eyes, and it was starting to melt with her tears. Her lashes had chunks of mascara in them, and there was a streak of mascara up to her left eyebrow. She did *not* look beautiful or like a rock star. She looked like a little kid who played with makeup and then got caught, ran away crying, and smacked her face into a doorknob.

"Oh no. Oh no, no, no," Sofia whispered in horror.

"It's not my fault!" Madison said. "You flinched!"

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. Madison scooped up all the makeup and dumped it back into her pencil pouch. "We gotta go."

"I can't go out there like this!" Sofia tore off a scratchy brown paper towel and desperately scrubbed at the mascara smear. "Don't leave me!"

"We're going to be late for class!" Madison's voice matched Sophia's volume. "What do you want me to do?"

"GIRLS." The lunchroom monitor swung open the door and held it open with her foot. "I can hear you down the hall. Go to class."

"But—"

"GO. TO. CLASS."

The woman had a stale chicken nugget where her heart should be. Sofia had no choice but to comply.

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As soon as she got to math, Sofia asked Mr. Katayama if she could go to the bathroom. But he sternly declared that she should have gone during study hall, lunch, or passing period, and told her to take her seat. Could the man not see that she was in a life-or-death situation?

She miserably sat down. For the rest of math class, she was sure that Jamal and Mateo were laughing at her. They kept giving her funny looks, then whispering and sniggering. Holden glanced over too, seemingly trying to telegraph her a message—something like *Do you need HELP?* Mr. Katayama leveled a no-nonsense look at all three of them. "Boys, would you like to share with the whole class what is more important than defining the properties of real numbers?"

Sofia's eyes got more and more itchy as the number sets got more complex until, in a moment of weakness and distraction, she rubbed them. Her knuckles came away magenta and gray.

Social studies was next, and she still didn't have time to fix her face. Mr. Wormlink was her second strictest teacher, and the class was on the opposite side of the school from her locker. As they passed her in the hall, several people cranked their necks to stare at her. There were sniggers, double takes, and one girl said, "Okay, that's a choice." It was way worse than being invisible.

By the time she walked into the classroom, she felt like a kitten in a corner—claws out and ready to hiss in self-defense. Pedro greeted her with an obnoxious snort and a theatrically loud, "What's wrong with your face? You look like a freak."

She shot back, "I can wash my face, but you'll still be short."

For a split second, Pedro looked horrified. His expression turned into a scowl almost instantly. But Sofia had seen it. She knew she'd poked a wound.

Around them, there was a chorus of "Ooooooooh," "Harsh!" and, "Sick burn!"

Mr. Wormlink quieted them with a stern, "Enough." He gave Sofia a disappointed look that made her want to burst out crying, but the look morphed into something more like concern. Then he asked, loud enough for the whole class to hear, "Do you need to go see the nurse? Do you need... some... supplies or something?"

Her classmates reacted with sniggers, stifled giggles, and uncomfortable shifting and shuffling. “Nurse” plus “supplies” was only ever code for “tampons.” So now, as badly as she wanted an escape, there was absolutely no way to leave this classroom before the final bell without declaring to the world that she needed a tampon. Miserably, she shook her head and slunk to her seat.

While Mr. Wormlink passed back the state capitols tests, Sofia pulled out her phone to check her face. (Her situation was desperate. School rules did not apply to her at the moment.) She got a quick glimpse of the wreckage—gray half-moons of smeared eyeliner and flakes of mascara on her cheeks coupled with the magenta eyeshadow made it look like she’d been punched twice. Pedro wasn’t wrong. She looked like an undead clown. But having him say it in front of the whole class only made it worse. And hurting him back hadn’t made her feel any better.

Suddenly the phone was stolen from under her nose.

She looked up to see Mr. Wormlink’s exasperated expression. He held her phone in one hand and, with the other, slapped her test onto her desk. There was a sloppy red C- next to her name.

Sofia was pretty sure that this was the worst moment of her life. The judgy look Mr. Wormlink gave her was a shadow of the one she felt in her soul.

As if reflecting some larger truth, all the big red *X*s on her test screamed, *“Wrong, wrong, WRONG.”*

She couldn’t do anything right. She felt ugly inside and out. She didn’t think this day could get any worse.

But she was wrong again.

A few minutes before the final bell, Mark walked in with a manila envelope. “From Mrs. Richter,” he said, handing it to Mr. Wormlink. As he turned to leave, he spotted Sofia. His eyes got big, and a loud laugh burst out of him. He pretended it was a coughing fit, but Sofia knew. Everyone knew.

Mark was laughing at her.

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Chapter 22
Come At Me

Holden was having *the worst day*. He watched the clock in the band room tick down the last five minutes of school as he tried to wrap his head around it all.

He'd spent the whole day trying to figure out a way to see Sofia. He was amped up about basketball tryouts and chair announcements, and she was the only one who might possibly want to hear about it.

When he did finally see her in math, she had hot pink eye shadow, mascara, and eyeliner smeared in dark rings around her eyes. And there was a yellow star sticker stuck to her chin. It gave the impression she'd been beaten up by a gang of kindergarteners. Ramirez and Jamal had thought it was hilarious, but for once Holden hadn't been able to laugh with them. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why she would have done that to her face. He was genuinely worried about her.

She'd barely looked at him, though. That was the worst part. He was trying not to take it personally. She'd barely looked at anyone. But he missed the days when she'd text him when she needed backup and light up when she saw him coming. He wished everyone would get tossed back into ISS so it could just be him and Sofia again.

By the time he'd made it to band, he was distracted and on edge. When Handen called him back to the practice room for his turn to audition for parts, he'd made too many little mistakes. Deacon took first-chair trumpet, and Holden had to move down. The worst part was that *nobody cared*. Deacon was happy to rub it in his face. His friends in percussion were in their own world. Yvonne and Tylee seemed to have formed a coalition against him and were actively recruiting for their anti-Holden club. He was taking side-eye from every direction.

The bell rang.

"All right! That's it for today! I expect everybody to be practicing the new music at home!" Mr. Handen yelled over the noise of spit valves clacking, music folders rustling, and instruments being disassembled. Holden glumly gathered his music into his band folder.

"Told you, Hellmann's," Deacon boasted as he ran a cloth through his mouthpiece. "I'll always be better than you."

"I beat you at the beginning of the year," Holden pointed out.

"That was a fluke," Deacon said. "I had the flu."

"Whatever." Holden escaped his second-chair prison and headed toward the percussion section.

Claudette intercepted him. "Hey, Holden. Tylee said you broke up."

Holden mentally braced for some sisterhood solidarity bullshoot. "Yeah. So?"

The emo girl shrugged and visibly checked him out. Not long ago he would have made sure he was standing just right with his shoulders flexed. But he didn't feel like doing that anymore. Claudette was cool, but why should he try to impress her? She offered him a hint of a smile anyway, and said, "Just a fact check."

Then she walked away. The old Holden would have been dating her by sundown. But not now. He didn't want to use her as a Sofia substitute. He didn't want to use her at all. He wanted to be different.

"Tough luck, man," Ramirez offered, clapping him on the shoulder. "You'll get it back next time."

"Or not," Ozdemir said, with a smirk that was less than sympathetic. He added under his breath, "Sucks to suck."

Jamal laughed into his fist.

Holden already felt like he'd fallen into a cactus. He couldn't ignore the spiked edges of Andrew's and Jamal's reactions.

Madison scrutinized Holden. "Do you even care?"

"Nah," Holden lied. "I didn't even practice. Concert season is a drag anyway."

That earned him points with the drummers, proven by affirming grunts and colorful language. They all lived for marching season.

Their approval gave him almost enough health points to get him through to the end of the day. Holden added, "Besides, eighth grade is a bad joke. It's going to be so much better when we get to high school."

There was another round of general agreement. Another little power-up.

Holden flexed his shoulders and leaned back casually—a classic Igo Big stance. "Anyway, I've got basketball. See you guys later."

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The locker room was packed when Holden got there, both competition and camaraderie in the atmosphere. He high-fived Brendan and a couple of other guys before taking his basketball shoes from his bag.

"Those are sick," Brendan said admiringly. "Are those custom?"

"I guess." Holden shrugged. But seriously, did Brendan only like him for his cool shoes and his money? Did *anyone* actually like him?

Sofia, whispered a hopeful little voice in Holden's head. *She's a real one.*

Coach Watkins blew his whistle from the doorway before shouting for them to get to the gym.

After an hour of passing drills, dribbling, shooting, and relays, Coach had them scrimmage—and he told Holden to guard Mark Chen.

The first time he fouled Mark, it was mostly an accident. And it came with the bonus of getting to trash-talk the guy for missing both his free throws.

The second and third times he fouled Mark weren't really Holden's fault—Mark was getting in his face on purpose. Probably because he was riled up about missing his shots.

The fourth time he fouled was a hundred percent on Mark. Mark had been showing off, dribbling between his legs and behind his back while running his mouth. "Why don't you go get cozy on the bench, since that's where you're going to be all season."

Holden stole the ball from him, barely grazing him in the process. But Mark threw himself on the floor like a crybaby drama queen.

Honestly, what did Sofia see in this guy?

Coach blew the whistle and shouted, "THOMAS! Lay off Chen!" A few minutes later, when tryouts ended for the day, coach held Holden back to yell at him for being aggressive. "We need cool heads out there. Team players. There's no room on my team for these kinds of shenanigans! Tomorrow you've got to show me better sportsmanship."

As he left the gym, Holden tried to work himself up to making nice with Mark. He'd apologize for being rough on the court. He'd tell him he looked good out there.

But when Holden found Mark in the locker room, it didn't go that way.

Mark was apparently doing a whole stand-up routine for the rest of the guys. Holden got there just as he was saying, "I lost my crap right in front of the whole room. I swear I couldn't breathe. I thought they were gonna have to call the paramedics."

The guys hooted and guffawed.

"What happened?" Holden asked.

Brendan offered, through residual laughter, "Sofia Santini messed up her face. Didn't you see her?"

Holden clenched his fists. "Yeah. I saw her."

After the day he'd had, Holden had zero patience for punks making fun of Sofia. Especially Mark, who she was so ride-or-die for and who had turned out to be a real jerk. She was the nicest person in the world, and she didn't deserve to be the butt of locker-room stand-up because she had one off day.

Mark didn't pick up on Holden's unamused expression or his poised-to-strike body language. He went back to entertaining the pack of sweaty jocks crowded around him. "She's been stalking me for like a year. She's getting more and more unhinged. One of these days, I'll be in the shower, and she'll be there like *WEEE, WEEE, WEEE*." He made the stabbing motion from the shower scene in *Psycho*.

Fifteen guys belly laughed.

Holden snapped. He pushed past the guys in front of him and shoved Mark hard into the lockers.

"What the—!" Mark roared a no-no word, shoving Holden back with a fury.

The backs of Holden's legs hit the bench between the banks of lockers, and he fell backward. But he had a two-handed grip on Mark's T-shirt by then, so he brought Mark with him. Luckily, knocking into a couple of the bystanders cushioned their fall to the ground.

They both scrabbled back to their feet, hurling profanities at each other like punches. The crowd of guys cheered them on like this was the best thing they'd seen all day. Holden lowered his shoulder and drove Mark into the lockers again, while Mark tore at his shirt, his hair... anything he could reach. And then Coach's whistle was piercing his brain, and he was being hauled up and away, while Mark pointed and shouted, "It was him! I didn't do anything! He started it!"

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Mark and Holden glared at each other across the coach's office until their responsible adults arrived. Mark's mother only took ten minutes to come flying through the door. She shouted down the Coach for letting this happen, for placing any blame on her son, and for not seeking immediate medical attention for his possible injuries. It was a little over the top, but she obviously really cared about her kid. Like moms do.

Behind her back, Mark gave Holden a gesture that would have made his mom gasp as he limped away theatrically with her arm around him for support.

Holden had to wait twenty-five more minutes before Crystyn finally showed up.

She walked in with her arms full of Keiki. "Are you Coach Watkins? I'm Holden's stepmother, Crystyn, spelled with two *y*'s."

"Nice to, uh, meet you, Mrs.... Crystyn," Coach said, his eyes bouncing from Holden to Crystyn to the dog. "The boys had quite a tussle in the locker room, I'm afraid. According to the witnesses, Holden—"

"Oh, actually," Crystyn interrupted, "can we just go? Maybe you can email his mom or something? I had to drive all the way out here, and it's not even supposed to be my day."

Coach Watkins seemed caught off guard by her total lack of motherly instincts. Holden felt kind of bad for the guy. Also, embarassed to be affiliated with Crystyn in any way. After doing a double take, Coach composed himself and said, "You understand I have to cut Holden from the team for this, as well as report it to the administration. He may be suspended. The school has a zero-tolerance policy for fighting."

"Okay?" Crystyn seemed irritated that she was still having to hear about this. "Can we go? We're just gonna go." She snapped her fingers at Holden and pointed to the office door before leading the way through it.

Holden followed her out to the car, leaving Coach Watkins scratching his eyebrow.

Outside the school, Crystyn rounded on him. "Oh my *God*, Holden. How stupid can you be?"

"Sorry," Holden mumbled.

"And you're disgusting. You're dirty and sweaty, and you stink."

Holden didn't bother to defend himself.

"You're not getting in my car like that. Just walk home. And tell your mother to answer her phone next time the school calls." With one last huff of annoyance, Crystyn stalked off toward her Land Rover, leaving Holden to find his own way home.

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Chapter 23
There's No Place Like Home

Around the same time the basketball coach was blowing his whistle to start tryouts, Sofia's mom found her sitting on the bathroom floor, crying rivers of watery black tears.

"Oh, sweetie," she said, gathering Sofia into her arms. They sat on the floor together, Mom smoothing her hair and *shushing* her, until Sofia's weeping subsided to shaky, gasping inhales.

Suddenly, Sofia's head popped up. "Mom!" she cried. "What are you doing here?! You should be driving!"

Mom reached for the box of tissues on the counter. "Destiny's mom texted that you were upset on the way home from school. So I came home as soon as I dropped off the lady I had."

She handed Sofia the tissue box.

Sofia felt worse than before. Now, on top of being ugly, a complete loser, and making an absolute fool of herself in front of the one person she wanted to impress, she had made her mom lose money that they needed to pay bills. Sofia took two tissues and sobbed into them, "But we need the money!"

"You think I would choose money over making sure my baby is okay? Ouch. Offense taken." Mom softened her gentle teasing with a compassionate smile. "You want to tell me what happened?"

Sofia sighed. "I thought I would look better with makeup, but it was so messed up and everyone was laughing at me. Why am I so bad at stuff that everyone else knows how to do?"

Mom's reassuring smile didn't waver. She tucked Sofia's long fringe behind her ear. "Well, first of all, no one is born knowing how to put on makeup.

Anyone who's good at it learned that skill *somehow*. Secondly, you don't need makeup. You're already beautiful."

"Mom." Sofia rolled her eyes. That was such a cringey mom thing to say.

"And—" Mom continued, refusing to be derailed or interrupted, "you're beautiful on the inside, which is way more important."

Would her mom say that if she'd heard her cutting down Pedro today? Or telling her friends their opinions were a "you problem" a few days ago? Or if she knew she'd given Mark every answer on the homework? Although Sofia thought she had cried herself out, fresh tears sprang to her eyes. She admitted, "I don't *feel* beautiful."

Mom put a firm hand on her back and made comforting circles, letting those words hang in the air for a while before saying, "I know what you mean. We all have days like that."

Sofia lifted her eyes to her mom's, not sure she fully believed that her smart, beautiful, graceful mother ever *really* felt ugly and worthless. But she didn't think her mom was a liar, either. So maybe she understood a little?

She sniffed and wiped her nose. "I don't know what's wrong with me—I break promises, I pop off at people. I'm a bad friend. When everyone was gone, Holden and I got kind of close. But then they all came back, and it's just been—different. I miss him. I wish it could just be us again... and then I feel terrible for wishing all my friends were gone."

With a sympathetic *aww,* Mom pulled her into a tight hug. "I promise it gets easier."

"When?"

"Eventually."

That wasn't super comforting. But the hug helped. Sofia pulled back and blew her nose, balling up the soggy Kleenex. "I'm sorry I wore makeup without asking you."

Mom pulled out another tissue and handed it to her. "Hun, you can wear makeup if you want to, even though you don't *need* it. As long as you're doing it because it makes you feel happy and confident, and not to try to meet some impossible beauty standard."

Sofia wiped her face again, giving her mom a look that said, *Weren't you listening when I told you I failed at this and humiliated myself?*

Mom asked, "Want me to teach you?"

Sofia wasn't totally convinced that her mom knew what she was doing—she wasn't one of those glamorous moms. But she figured it was worth a try. She said, "Sure."

Mom stood up and pulled Sofia to her feet. They looked in the mirror together. Sofia's eyes were red and puffy, and her face looked like it had been tie-dyed with angry pink splotches and gray streaks. It's not called ugly crying for nothing.

"What's this?" Mom pointed at mirror-Sofia's chin sticker.

"It's a pimple patch. It's supposed to make pimples go away."

"Brilliant! Does it work?" Mom asked.

Sofia scrunched her nose. "I don't know. My friend Madison said it does."

Mom crossed her index and middle fingers on both hands, like *Here's hoping*. Then she said, "Okay. The first thing you need is a clean face." She held out a squeeze bottle that said it was "all-natural foaming cleanser for sensitive skin."

Just washing her face made Sofia feel better. She peeled the star off, and her pimple was almost gone.

"I am getting us some of those!" Mom declared. Then she upended a small fabric bag, spilling several tubes and little brushes onto the counter. Unlike the bright colors and familiar brands of Madison's makeup, Mom's containers were earth-toned and labeled ORGANIC, VEGAN, and CRUELTY-FREE. As she unscrewed the top of one tube, she said, "You don't want people to notice your makeup. You want them to see *you*."

After what happened today, Sofia couldn't agree more.

Mom showed Sofia how to use concealer, blush, eyeliner, and mascara. She kept saying, "Just a little," and Sofia kept saying, "I know."

When they'd put on *just a little* of everything, Sofia blinked at herself in the mirror.

Mom pronounced the verdict. "Still beautiful!"

But Sofia wasn't sure. She didn't look anything like Ashlyn. And the memory of Mark having a laughing-coughing fit in front of the whole class was burned

permanently into her brain. She was officially scarred for life. On the other hand, she did like how the makeup made her eyes look bigger and brighter. She thought she looked a little more grown up and kind of cute.

The fifth-grade vibe was officially banished. Maybe Mark would see her differently now.

"How about breakfast for dinner?" Mom said, returning all the tubes and brushes to the little fabric bag. "I think I have just enough time to make omelets before I go to the studio. And we still have some sourdough bread from my last batch. I can toast that up."

Sofia agreed, and Mom turned to leave. "Mom?" Sofia called. When her mom looked back, Sofia said, "Thank you."

Mom's smile said, *I love you*. She asked, "Do you want to crack the eggs?"

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Sofia had cracked three eggs into a bowl when the doorbell rang. She ignored it —no one would ever ring that bell hoping to talk to a kid, except maybe potential kidnappers. Mom put down her knife and went to the front door. A few seconds later she chirped, "Hi, Holden! Good to see you! Come on in. We're making omelets."

Holden?! For some reason Sofia was suddenly nervous and excited and embarrassed. It was a weird way to feel about a friend coming over, but he'd seen her with that gosh-awful makeup on and this was also the first time he'd come over since the big fight. Those were definitely the only reasons her heart was beating fast.

She hurried toward the door, passing her mom, who mouthed, "He's cute," on her way back to the kitchen. Sofia's cheeks went hot. Her mom was so embarrassing.

Holden was standing by the door with his hands in his pockets, looking like he wasn't sure if he was invited any farther inside. She felt like he was studying her face—in a good way—so maybe the makeup was working. Not that she wanted it to work on Holden. He would never think she was pretty, and they

couldn't like each other anyway. He always said she was like a little sister to him. But maybe he was thinking that she looked older. That's all.

"Hey, Sofia," he said, in the tone of voice usually reserved for funerals and hospitals.

Oh no, thought Sofia. *This is a sympathy visit. Please don't say anything about the makeup catastrophe.*

"Hi." Sofia lifted her chin, trying to make sure she looked like the kind of person who didn't need sympathy. Cool, confident, decidedly undevastated. Then she deflected any possible questions with one of her own. "What are you doing here? Don't you have basketball?"

Holden shrugged. "Yeah, it finished. And I got cut, so."

"What?!" Sofia was genuinely shocked. "But you're so good! *How?* I mean, *why*?"

She had actually never been to a basketball game and knew nothing about basketball. But other people said Holden was good, even people like Destiny who hated his guts.

Holden cleared his throat like he was uncomfortable. "It's a long story."

Sofia thought hard about whether now was a time to press for him to open up or to change the subject and trust that he'd tell her when he was ready. She decided not to push. She just said, "I'm really sorry. The team won't be as good without you."

Holden ran his hand through his hair—not in an attention-seeking way like usual, more like he was worried there was something wrong with it. "Sorry I stink. I just… came straight here."

"You probably don't stink. But even if you do, it's okay," Sofia said.

"Anyway, you seemed like you were having a really rough day, so I just wanted to see if you were okay."

"You could have texted me," Sofia pointed out.

"Yeah," Holden agreed. "To be honest, I didn't really want to go to my house. And I know you don't love being home alone. I thought your mom would be at work or whatever."

As if on cue, Mom called, "Dinner's almost ready! Come set the table!"

"She came home early. Come on." Sofia led Holden into the kitchen, where they got out plates and forks and put them at the two-person table. Sofia brought a chair in from her bedroom, which made it possible for them all to sit, but completely impossible to walk through the cramped kitchen.

"This is really good, Mrs. Santini," Holden said after the first bite.

"It's just Kelsey. And it *is* good, isn't it? I get these eggs from an urban farm nearby. They're organic and so fresh. And the spinach is—"

"Mom, stop," Sofia groaned. "Holden doesn't care where the spinach is from."

Her mom bit into her toast, looking enraptured—like she was auditioning for a toast commercial.

After a beat, Holden said, "I really didn't mean to horn in on dinner."

"Don't be silly!" Mom said, spreading a thick layer of butter on another piece of warm toast. She put it on Holden's plate. "Now, Sofia," she said, "I already heard about your *adho*, obviously. How about your *ananda*?"

Sofia caught Holden's understandably confused look. "Those are yoga words," she explained.

"Sanskrit," Mom clarified. "*Adho* means 'downward.' *Ananda* is a state of complete bliss."

"You could just ask about highs and lows like a regular person," Sofia said.

"But *adho* helps us remember that there is value in difficulties."

"Mom," Sofia whisper yelled, only half joking. "You're using your yoga teacher voice."

"Here's the deal," Mom countered in her normal tone. "The more *you* talk, the less I do. So answer the question."

Sofia's day had been so dominated by *adho* that, at first, she couldn't think of any *ananda*. But as her mom and Holden both focused on her, waiting for her to speak—interested, listening, accepting—she realized that what made her happy was right here.

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Chapter 24
Tastes Like Happiness

"You guys make me happy," Sofia said. "My *ananda* was when you came home." She looked from her mom to Holden.

Holden suddenly felt like a whole omelet was stuck halfway down his esophagus. If a genie had offered him three wishes at that moment, he would have wished to grow up and marry Sofia, get adopted by her mom, and stay in this house forever. And, yeah, he knew those three wishes didn't make sense together. But he also didn't have a magic lamp, so what did it matter?

Sofia blushed and looked away, backpedaling. "I mean *here*. When you came here. Not like this is your home or something. That was so weird. I'll be under the table if anyone needs me."

"What about you, Holden?" Kelsey said, turning her encouraging smile on him. "What was your *adho* and *ananda*?"

Holden thought about his lousy day—getting booted to second-chair trumpet, kicked off the basketball team, the fight with Mark, the thing with Crystyn, and worrying about Sofia. How would he even pick the worst thing? But the best thing was too easy. It was seeing that Sofia was okay and finally getting to talk to her. It was Sofia welcoming him even though he stank. Sofia saying he was home. He obviously wasn't going to say any of that sappy mess.

He reverted to an old standby Igo Big expression of total confidence and an answer that wouldn't leave him vulnerable. "The *ah-doe* was how cold it was this morning on the way to school."

Sofia gave him a look like she could see right through him. She was probably thinking he should have said getting cut from the team. She didn't know the half of it.

"And the *ana*-whatever, the good one," he continued. "I'd have to say this omelet."

It wasn't the truth, but it was close enough. The omelet was delicious. The fact that someone *wanted* to cook for him and, like, cared about every ingredient she'd put in there made it extra special. He finished it in four bites, and then he waited for Sofia and Kelsey to slowly work through theirs.

"Okay, kiddos," Kelsey said, as soon as her plate was empty. "I have to get to work. I have a beginners' class at six, power yoga at seven, and deep-healing meditation at eight." She leaned over and pressed a kiss on the top of Sofia's head. "Love you, *sweetie*." She stood, made prayer hands, and said, "Namaste, Holden, and Jai Mashi." As she walked out, she called, "Make good choices! Don't put your hormones in charge."

"MOM!" Sofia's cheeks bloomed bright pink, and she clapped her hands over them.

Holden choked in surprise.

As soon as her mom was gone, Sofia blurted, "That was so awkward!"

Holden made his voice light. "At least she cares."

With what seemed like a cleansing breath, Sofia stood and gathered the dishes. She took them to the sink, added dish soap, and turned on the faucet. Holden went to stand next to her, took the sponge, and started wiping the dishes with it. Not only had he never washed dishes at home, he had never even considered what happened to dirty dishes. Did his mother wash them? Did she hire someone to do that? It was a mystery. But he didn't mind chores with Sofia. It felt kind of homey. Almost like playing house.

"Where's your dad?" he asked, handing her a soapy plate. He'd been wondering this for a while but had felt like it would be rude to ask. It seemed like the kind of thing they could talk about, though, after seeing each other at their worst.

Sofia rinsed the plate contemplatively and set it in the dish drainer. "I don't have a dad. Not really. My mom had me when she was seventeen. She said they were both still kids, and he wasn't ready to be anyone's dad."

"Okay. That was fourteen years ago," Holden scoffed, handing her another plate. "He's gotta be like middle-aged now. What's his excuse *now*?"

Sofia watched the water cascade over the plate. “I have no idea. Hopefully he’s busy living his best life.”

“Seriously?” Holden scrubbed at the omelet pan. “Why don’t you hate him?”

Sofia shrugged. “I don’t know, I just don’t. I like my family the way it is. I never knew him, so I can’t miss him.” She took the pan from him with a reassuring smile. As she rinsed it, she said, “I remember we lived with my grandma and grandpa when I was really little, and Mom fought with them a lot. She said she was ‘really lost’ back then. Then, when I was six or seven, she went on this spiritual retreat to Nepal. In the Himalayas. You know?”

“Like Doctor Strange.” Holden regretted the shallow movie reference immediately.

Sofia giggled. “I think there was more yoga and a lot less creation of interdimensional portals.”

Holden laughed. Who would have guessed that this nightmare day could end with easy laughter?

“Hey!” Sofia said brightly. “We never did the second transformation video. Remember? Should we do the one for clothes? I can pull my Bee Kind sweatshirt out of the giveaway.”

When Holden had gotten here, Sofia had seemed like a brave but guarded trauma survivor. Now she looked really happy. Could he take personal credit for that?

Of course, Holden agreed to make the video—even though he couldn’t bring himself to care about likes and boosts anymore. Being with Sofia was so much more real than all of that.

Anyway, he enjoyed the twenty minutes they spent working on it. Sofia ran back to her room and reappeared wearing her old clothes. They filmed the spin. Then she ran away again and came back in her Pearl Jam shirt and skater pants, and they filmed the ending. Holden couldn’t decide which version of Sofia he liked best. She looked really cool in her new clothes, but the Bee Kind sweatshirt reminded him of the days when it was just them.

After the video, Sofia asked if he’d finished reading the chapter for English. When he said he hadn’t even started it, she asked if he wanted to stay and read together.

“I mean, you probably need to get home, right?” Sofia said, as if she regretted inviting him. But this felt closer to home than either of his parents’ houses. And he hadn’t forgotten their very first conversation, when Sofia had told him she didn’t like quiet. Empty houses were the worst kind of quiet. Or maybe the second worst, after angry silences.

So he stayed. And he did all his homework for the first time in years, just to have a reason to keep staying. And, you know, he didn’t even hate *Little Women*.

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Chapter 25
Can We All Agree Not to Mention Monday?

It was hard to make herself go to school and face everyone on Tuesday. Even after her mom helped her apply "just a little" makeup as, in her words, "armor for the day." Even though her hair was falling perfectly in long, chunky waves. Even wearing her skater pants and a NAMASTE shirt that her mom let her borrow. It fell off one shoulder, which made Sofia feel more like a fierce girl than anything ever had. She liked her shoulders. They deserved to be seen.

But even with *all of that*, how would she face the people she'd made a fool of herself in front of yesterday? How would she face Mark?

It helped that, when her mom dropped her off, her friends greeted her with hugs and exuberant affirmations of how cool she looked. It helped that Holden texted to check on her and sent a meme of a cute cat that said, "Are you kitten me?"

She carried all that positive energy into Mrs. Schmeckpepper's room and took her seat. As people filed in, each one glanced her way, as if to check for today's fail. Or maybe she was imagining it. She made the face Holden had taught her—the fierce-girls-do-not-care face. And she stared at Mrs. Schmeckpepper's quote poster: I AM OUT WITH LANTERNS, LOOKING FOR MYSELF. —EMILY DICKINSON.

Was it a quote? Or a very short poem? What did it mean, exactly? Sofia wondered, refusing to acknowledge Pedro trying to catch her eye. Since she didn't know anything about Emily Dickinson, Sofia pictured Jo March from *Little Women*, in her old-fashioned Civil War–era dress, holding a lantern and wandering around. It must have been dark out, or she wouldn't need the lantern. Jo stepped carefully, unable to see past the circle of flickering firelight.

But she wasn't looking for how to get home. She was looking for herself. How does a person lose *herself*?

Mark entered the room. Sofia stubbornly stared at the poster. But she felt the magnetic pull of him. She felt a piece of her heart break off and shatter.

"Good morning, class!" Mrs. Schmeckpepper called them to attention. "'Isn't it nice to think that today is a new day with no mistakes in it yet?' as Anne of Shirley *very nearly* said."

Old Sofia probably would have loved that quote. But New Sofia had made enough mistakes to know that they follow you. They cling to you. You can't shake them off just by letting the sun set and rise again.

She resigned herself to spending the next fifty minutes watching the back of Mark's head as she slowly died inside. Because Mark would never forget how she'd humiliated herself. Because she'd finally, *finally* had a chance with him, and she'd blown it.

But without even pausing to take a breath, Mrs. Schmeckpepper said, "Mark, come here please." When he went to her desk, the teacher discreetly handed him something—was it a pink slip? He gathered his stuff and left the room.

So, in the end, all Sofia had to stare at was the empty space where Mark should have been.

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Chapter 26
Let's Make a Deal

As soon as Holden walked into his first-hour class, Wormlink handed him a pink slip. "You need to report to Mr. Oosterbeek," Wormlink informed him. "Get your makeup work before the end of the day. You won't be excused from my class."

"Thanks a lot," Holden muttered sarcastically. This day was starting out *great*.

Mark was in Ostridge Beak's office when Holden got there. Holden took a seat, figuring this was about the fight and that at least one of them was about to get ISS. Like a prisoner facing torture, Holden steeled himself not to break. He had no regrets about shutting Chen's obnoxious mouth for him, and he refused to take anything Ostridge Beak said or did seriously.

Ostridge Beak opened with, "Coach Watkins told me what happened, fellas."

Fellas? Holden silently scoffed. *Gee whiz, mister! It was just a little tussle.*

"We have a zero-tolerance policy about violence."

Golly, Holden thought. *I guess you* have *mentioned that once or a thousand times.*

"But we also believe in restorative justice. So you have two choices, gents."

Gents?! Holden almost cracked up. *Crikey, gov'nah!* He wanted to say it so bad.

Ostridge Beak folded his hands on the desk. "You can talk this out right now and demonstrate to Coach Watkins and to me that you are able to learn and grow from your mistakes, or you can both serve ISS and sit out this season of basketball."

"But I didn't do anything!" Mark protested. "He just flipped out for no reason."

Holden knew when to keep his mouth shut. Sometimes. The principal eyed both of them. "That rarely ever happens, Mr. Chen."

Holden gained a little more respect for Mr. Oosterbeek.

"Now, I've reserved the conference room for you gentlemen for the next hour. If, at the end of that hour, you are able to show me a written peace agreement, signed by both of you, you'll be reinstated to the basketball team, and that will be the end of it. If not—we go to option B."

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Holden and Mark sat at the conference table, looking anywhere but at each other, the clock ticking loudly. There was a single piece of paper and a pencil on the table between them. When Holden got tired of staring at the bare white wall, he watched the foot traffic in the front office through the propped-open door.

Eventually, Mark said, "My mom will kill me if I get suspended, so you'd better hurry up and apologize."

Holden drummed his fingers on the table. He had no plan to apologize. Mark one hundred and thirty percent deserved what he got and more. He leveled a cold look at Mark and said, "Well, that sucks for you. Because, I'm gonna be honest, I'm not gonna get in trouble. My parents don't give a donkey butt about ISS." It was true—none of his guardians cared what happened to him unless it inconvenienced them. Therefore, Mark had way more to lose.

"Don't you care about basketball?" Mark huffed.

Holden shrugged. Basketball was fun, and—most important—it kept him from having to go home after school. But his new plan was to hang out at Sofia's every day, which made getting cut from basketball feel pretty harmless.

"Not really." Holden opened negotiations. "So, you're going to have to make it worth my while."

He could see from Mark's face that his speech had hit home. In order to negotiate, though, Holden needed to figure out what he actually wanted. He had to think.

He wanted Sofia to realize that Mark didn't deserve her. He wanted her to know that Holden had stood up for her. He wanted to be her hero.

Should he make Mark tell her about making fun of her and admit that he only called her to get homework answers?

She would be crushed. Heartbroken. Holden couldn't do that to her.

He wanted Sofia to be happy. *Even if it kills me,* Holden reminded himself. So that meant she couldn't *ever* find out what Mark had said about her.

This was way past saving a baby bird. This was like the ultimate boss battle in his quest to become a good guy.

He massaged his forehead, trying to make his thoughts cooperate. *Help,* he prayed. *This is too hard.*

"Well?" Mark broke in. "What do you want? I'm not going to do anything illegal."

Holden took another few seconds to gather his courage.

"I want you to promise not to *ever* trash-talk Sofia." His mouth was so dry, it was hard to not sound like Batman. "I want you to be nice to her."

Mark leaned back and crossed his arms. "What, are you in love with her or something?"

Mark had hit him right where it hurt. But Holden wasn't about to let him see that. His confident mask never wavered.

"She's my friend," he said firmly. "She's genuinely the nicest person at this school. And she *really* likes you."

He knew Sofia wouldn't want him to tell Mark that, but this was the boss battle. He had to use every weapon he had. Even honesty.

Mark scoffed. "Sofia's weird. She's like a puppy—I can't shake her. Everything I said was true."

Holden watched his fist clench and release. "You really are a jerk, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one" was Mark's extremely mature response.

Holden couldn't not growl just a little. But he decided to change tactics—appeal to Mark's better side. "Come on, Mark, I know you can be a nice guy. Remember last year, when you picked her for your partner for the slime lab?"

Mark looked like he genuinely had no memory of that. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh, right! Yeah. I can always tell who'll be a great lab partner—you

know, the people who color code their class notes and always carry around extra school supplies."

"Good students?"

"Suck-ups," Mark corrected. "Anyway, they do all the work, and we both get the A."

Holden fought to keep his voice calm. "Can't you just be the great guy she thinks you are?" he said. "Just, like, *try* to deserve her."

"Why should I?"

Because no matter what I do, she only wants you. Crushing the sad thought, Holden leaned back and crossed his arms. "Aside from me signing that paper so that you can go back to basketball and get out of ISS and stay on your mommy's good side?"

Mark looked defiant. Holden narrowed his eyes, and they had a stare off.

Now it was Mark who had the upper hand. Because Holden wanted Sofia to be happy more than Mark wanted to not get in trouble.

Holden broke the stare off. He couldn't believe what he was saying, even as it came out of his mouth. "How about twenty bucks?"

"You'd pay me twenty dollars to be nice to Sofia Santini?" Mark's face was a mix of surprise and skepticism, with just a little greed around the eyes.

Holden pulled a twenty out of his wallet and put it on the table.

Mark eyed it, calculating. After a few beats, he said, "How about fifty?"

"How about you take this twenty as a down payment. And when Sofia tells me how *nice* you're being, I give you ten more."

"Every week," Mark countered.

What Holden wanted to say had a lot of colorful words in it. But what he actually said was, "Deal."

Mark pocketed the twenty.

Then Holden made him practice what he would say to apologize to Sofia.

When he was satisfied that the apology would be sufficient, Holden took the pencil and wrote: "I, Holden W. Thomas, started the fight. Violence is never the answer. Now I see the error of my ways." Then he signed it. He slid the paper to Mark and dictated while Mark wrote: "Words can hurt. From now on, if I can't think of anything nice to say, I won't say anything at all."

If Mr. Oosterbeek noticed that it was a very canned and sarcastic apology letter, he didn't mention it. He had them shake hands and sent them back to class.

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Chapter 27

Magic is Real, Miracles Happen, Dreams DO Come True

Halfway through the day, it was starting to feel possible to leave yesterday's drama in the past. People had looked, realized Sofia's face was normal today, and moved on.

There was a lot to move on to. Every eighth grader got an invitation to a workday this Saturday to "beautify" the school (aka, pay for their Glow Night crimes). Tickets for the winter dance would be on sale next week, only for those who had signed into and out of workday.

But girls were already starting to take the leap and ask people to the dance.

The entire girls' volleyball team stormed Sofia's science class, surrounded one guy's desk, and chanted, "Roses are red, violets are blue, Lindy wants to go to the dance with you!"

Ms. Medgar, the science teacher, just paused the lesson until they were finished. Even the strictest teachers went along with the controlled chaos of the Winter Clincher.

Later, a guy opened his locker and what looked like a million Ping-Pong balls fell out. Sofia read the Sharpie messages written on the balls that rolled past her feet: "??. Andrea. WinDa. would ya?"

But nothing compared to the miracle that happened at lunch. Mark walked up to Sofia's table and said, "Hey, Sofia, can I talk to you for a sec?"

With some firm pushes from Destiny and Reese, Sofia stood and faced Mark, clenching every muscle in her body. Even her lungs were in lockdown.

"Sorry for laughing yesterday," Mark said, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking past Sofia's shoulder. "It took me by surprise. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

It was all the right words, but something felt slightly off. Like he had memorized the speech or was reading a teleprompter. Sofia glanced over her shoulder, but there were no cue cards or anything.

The thing was, Sofia told herself, apologizing was *hard*. He probably *had* practiced the speech, but so what? Did that make it less real? Sofia wanted to forgive him. She wanted to help him not be uncomfortable.

"It's okay," she squeaked, before forcing her voice back down to a normal octave. "You couldn't help it. I did look kind of... horrible."

Mark went "Ha!" But then he said, "You look really pretty today, though."

Her heart went into overdrive, and she had to lock her knees to stay standing.

How long had she dreamed of hearing Mark say that to her? When dreams become real, Sofia discovered, it feels like getting thrown off a horse—like the world is spinning and you can't breathe and you probably have a concussion.

Sofia choked out, "Uh, uh, kay."

"Okay," Mark said. "See ya."

As he walked away, Sofia clutched her chest, gasping for air. She lowered herself to the bench, to the sound of her friends' encouragement, questions, and instant situational analysis. As soon as she could breathe again and move her limbs and stuff, she told her friends she was going to the bathroom. In the hall, she took out her phone, turned it on, and sent a text to Holden.

Sofia

U R NOT GOING TO BELIEVE WHAT JUST HAPPENED!!!!!!!

Holden's response came in seconds.

Coach

????

As she wrote out the play-by-play of Mark's apology, Sofia could hardly believe it herself. But somehow telling Holden about it made it feel solid and real.

It made her heart beat fast all over again, thinking about how hard and beautiful it is to admit when you've hurt someone. How most people did like Holden said—pretended nothing happened and hoped that was good enough. A true apology, like Mark had given her, was a priceless gift. Mark really was an amazing person.

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The next day Mark waved to her when he walked into English class. He nodded and waved to a few other people, too. But he most definitely—between Pedro and Olivia—looked *right at* her and raised his hand in a clear and obvious *hi*.

She raised her hand in return, her cheeks burning, her mind racing.

Maybe this was one of those "blessing in disguise" situations. Like, maybe Mark felt so bad about laughing at her before that he was being nice to make up for it. Maybe the apology had kind of broken the ice. If Schmeckpepper wasn't so strict about the no-phones-in-class rule, Sofia would have texted Holden and asked him what he thought.

Mrs. Schmeckpepper clapped twice as soon as morning announcements finished. "It's Wednesday," she said, "but we are not full of woe, I hope."

There were a few responding groans.

"Today we're going to continue our journey into *Little Women*," she continued, undaunted. As she spoke, she wrote on the whiteboard: "To thine own self be true." "I want you to make a four-slide presentation explaining the unique character traits of each March sister, and how she is or is not true to herself in the first five chapters of the book." With a visual check for understanding and a *Get to it* hand wave, the teacher announced, "This is a partner activity. So pair up. You have fifty minutes!"

In the mad chaos of people picking partners, Sofia sat frozen like a raccoon caught in a porch light. Asking someone to be her partner was impossible. What if they were just about to ask someone else, and it got super awkward? What if they didn't like her at all, and she'd never realized it? What if they got a bad grade and the person blamed her? Sofia had always waited for someone to ask her, and a haircut and new clothes weren't enough to change that.

"Sofia—you and me?" It was Mark. He had swiveled in his seat to rescue her.

Sofia wanted to laugh and burst out crying and shout, *Yes! Yes! A million times YES!* But she had enough fierce girl training by now to keep all that weirdness to herself. She nodded. She couldn't form the word "sure"—at least not in a cool way that meant, *I don't care either way but if you want to then whatever I guess.*

Thankfully—because she was pretty sure her legs wouldn't work—Mark came to her, dragging the closest desk up against hers before dropping into the attached seat.

Partnering with Mark was yet another dream come true. It was just like the slime lab all over again. He had chosen her and saved her from a moment of social panic. Not all heroes wear capes.

About thirty minutes in, though—and this really wasn't a big deal in any way—Sofia couldn't help noticing that she was doing most of the work. While Sofia diligently typed character traits on slides, Mark joked around with people in other groups, complained about how hungry he was, and chewed a piece of gum he found in his backpack.

At one point, he glanced at what she was typing and asked, "Who's *Marmee*?"

"The mom?" Sofia wasn't questioning her answer, she was asking, *How do you not know who one of the main characters is?*

"Oh," Mark said with a shrug. "Right. I forgot."

Sofia tried to give him a chance to contribute to the next slide. "What about Amy?" she asked, fingers ready to type his answer.

"Amy?" Mark repeated. "Um, I'm not sure. What do you think?"

Did he read any of this? She thought, annoyed. But then she reminded herself how nice it was for Mark to want to hear her ideas. He thought she was smart. She ventured, "She's pretty, but she's worried about her looks. She hates being poor. She wants to marry someone rich. The other sisters think she's vain and selfish. I think Amy is true to herself because she shows her real feelings about things."

"Nailed it!" Mark nodded his approval and gave her one of his heart-stopping, dimple-popping smiles. "Put *that*."

Sofia went to work making the slide.

"What do you think is *really* in that cup?" Mark whispered, nodding toward the teacher's desk.

Sofia glanced up. Mrs. Schmeckpepper was grading a stack of vocab tests, sipping absent-mindedly from a large colorful mug that said, WE'RE ALL MAD HERE.

Sofia liked Mrs. Schmeckpepper. She was really excited about English, and she was a good teacher. But she liked Mark more. And she wanted him to think she was funny.

So she said, "Probably vodka."

Mark grinned. "With just a sprinkle of Xanax."

Sofia knew what a fierce, funny, cool girl would do—she'd one-up him. So she added, "It's a great way to wash down her *special* brownies."

Mark snorted and doubled over wheezing with stifled laughter. A few people looked over, decided he was fine, and went back to their work. When Mrs. Schmeckpepper gave them a look, Mark pretended he was coughing.

Like he had on Monday.

Sofia shook off the thought. He'd apologized for that, and she'd forgiven him.

But even as Mark smiled at her like she was hilarious, she didn't feel funny. She felt mean.

What did being nice ever get you? she yelled at herself. *It's just a joke. It's just a teacher.*

She told herself that Coach Holden would be proud of her.

But would he be? She'd never heard Holden make fun of someone behind their back.

Sofia's shame spiral was interrupted when a girl named Yvonne came into their classroom with a large Starbucks cup, strode to one of the groups near the far wall, held out the cup, and said loudly, "Vikram, we'll have a latte fun if you go to the winter dance with me."

Vikram took the cup and said, "Yeah, sure."

Everyone cheered.

Mark leaned over and whispered. "Lame. If someone asked me like that, I'd say no."

Sofia didn't dare look into his beautiful eyes. Without turning, she said, "Why? Nobody ever says no. Right?"

Mark scoffed, "Anybody who asks me better bring their A game. That's all."

Sofia's first thought was how arrogant that sounded. But she smacked it away almost instantly. This was *Mark*. The guy who had noticed her in the picking-partners panic and saved the day. Again. He was maybe the one person in this school who was humble enough to sincerely apologize when he hurt someone's feelings. Deep down, he was selfless and humble, she knew that.

And she knew that the *someone* asking him to the dance had to be *her*. He'd issued the challenge and she would accept it: to give him an utterly unforgettable Winter Clincher.

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By dinnertime, Sofia had had about seven hours to think of and throw out ideas of how to ask Mark to the winter dance. No idea was good enough. She needed something spectacular. Mark wanted her to bring her A game.

But she was the girl who never asked anybody to anything. This was way more important—and a thousand times harder—than picking a partner for a class project.

When the doorbell rang, Sofia jumped like a startled cat. But then she sprang for the door because it must be Holden. She wanted it to be him.

And it was.

"Holden!" Sofia was ridiculously happy to see him. She almost threw her arms around him, but clasped her hands behind her back to restrain herself. Then she noticed he wasn't as perfectly put together as usual. She asked, "Are you... did you go running?"

Holden sniffed himself. "Sorry. I was at basketball."

"No! I'm glad you're here."

Too enthusiastic. Sofia derided herself. *Too nice. Not fierce.* But Holden didn't call her on it. In fact, she could see him let his guard down as he offered her a small but genuine smile. So he must not mind her being too nice when it was just the two of them.

Even so, she changed gears. "Wait, didn't you get cut from basketball?"

Holden's eyes shifted left, then right. Then he cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, Coach Watkins changed his mind."

She wanted to ask *why?* But Holden suddenly pulled out his phone and showed it to her. "Did you see our new video has over a thousand likes?"

"Awesome!"

He was obviously changing the subject, but if he didn't want to talk about basketball, she wasn't going to make him. She smelled her mom's bread and added, "Wanna stay for dinner?"

"Did Abraham Lincoln like to wrestle?"

Sofia cracked up. "I don't know. Did he?"

Holden blushed for the first time she could ever remember. "Yeah, he was a beast. He's in the wrestling hall of fame."

"So does that mean yes? About dinner?"

Holden smirked. "That means 'why would you even ask me such an obvious question?'"

Sofia put her arm through his and walked him toward the kitchen. "The fact that you think that question is obvious means you're either an Abraham Lincoln superfan or a secret history nerd."

"Both. And you cannot tell *anyone*. I'm serious." Holden sounded desperate.

"Oh, too late," Sofia teased. "I already texted the group chat and put it on the internet and tagged Igo Big." Holden jabbed her ribs, right in the ticklish spot, and she scream laughed. "I won't tell!"

As thrilling as it was to have Mark pay attention to her, it was a relief to have Holden here. He felt safe and comfortable and fun. After spending the whole day stressed out about what she could do to impress Mark, finally—arm in arm with Holden—she didn't have to impress anyone. They could help each other laugh at themselves.

Sofia's mom had made corn chowder and more bread in the bread machine. Holden acted like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. Her mom made them say their *adho* and *ananda* again. Then Sofia brought up the question that had plagued her since English.

"What's the best way to ask Mark to the winter dance?"

It was silent for a second. Holden's spoon hovered halfway to his mouth. Then Mom said, "Can't you just ask him?"

"No, Mom! It's Winter Clincher. How you ask is a big deal. And he said that I have to bring my A game."

Holden put his spoon back in his bowl. "He said that?"

Sofia tore her bread into tiny pieces. "Well, he said *whoever* asks him. I definitely need to do it before Ashlyn does."

Holden was quiet again, and Mom looked from him to Sofia and back. Finally, Holden said, "How about a poster?"

Sofia shook her head. "Too many people do posters."

"One of those LEGO bouquets?" Holden tried again.

"Too expensive." Sofia scrunched her nose.

"Singing telegram?"

Now he was just being ridiculous. She punched his arm hard. "I hate you!"

Her mom gasped, *"Sofia!"*

"Mom, chill," said Sofia.

Mom leaned back in her chair, both eyebrows up. "Did you just tell your mother to *chill*?"

Sofia rolled her eyes. "*Oh my gosh!* You're *so* embarrassing."

Mom crossed her arms. "I feel like you need some time alone to think about what kind of energy you're putting into the universe."

"Like a time out? Are you serious?" Sofia could feel her whole body getting hot. "I'm fourteen!"

"Old enough to make good choices."

Holden stared at his soup, looking like the walls were crashing in around him. It made fighting with her mom a thousand times worse. Sofia wished Holden wasn't witnessing this.

She pushed away from the table, fled to her room, and threw herself onto her bed.

How was she supposed to transform herself when her mom still acted like she was a little kid? And why was her mom making a big deal about a few tiny words instead of caring that her daughter had been living heartbroken in the shadows and that she finally had a chance to make it right?

She focused all her effort on staying mad. Because if she let herself think about "what kind of energy she was putting into the universe," she'd think that her mom was her whole world, and she'd feel like an ungrateful brat.

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Chapter 28
Things Get Gummed Up

Holden could feel Kelsey watching him, but he didn't look up. This house had been like an oasis for him—a place where family loved each other and embraced him like he belonged. But it was a mirage all along.

He wanted to run away.

Maybe it was him. If he hadn't been here, the fight probably never would have happened. If he hadn't gone along with Sofia's plan to get Mark to notice her, she would still be close with her mother.

"You okay, Holden?" asked Kelsey.

"Um." Holden swallowed. "Yeah."

"You don't seem okay."

Holden said nothing.

"All families fight sometimes, you know," she pressed.

"I didn't think you guys did," Holden admitted.

"Well." Kelsey sounded amused. "Sorry to disappoint you."

After an awkward silence, Holden cleared his throat. "I should go."

"Can I ask you something first?" Kelsey said, getting up and clearing the dishes off the table. "What do *you* think of Mark?"

Holden's thoughts raced. He could get Sofia's mother on *his* side. He could tell her Mark was a scumsucker. Maybe Sofia wouldn't be allowed to ask him out or text him or anything. That would be the best possible scenario for Holden. But would Sofia ever forgive him for that? And wouldn't he be making things worse between her and her mom?

Holden went with, "He's okay."

"Hmmm." Kelsey wiped her hands on a dish towel. "Well, I need to get moving. I have a six o'clock prenatal yoga class. Want a ride home?"

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That night, at 8:54, Holden texted:

Holden

don't worry sofia mark will say yes however you ask him

Sweet Sofia

Thank you 🙏 that's really sweet of you to say 😭

It wasn't sweet. It was a guarantee. He'd been in negotiations with Mark since he'd gotten home from Sofia's house. The deal was that if Sofia was the first person to ask him, Mark would say yes, no matter what. All it would cost Holden was fifty bucks and his Chicago Bulls hoodie.

At school, he could barely look at Sofia. He couldn't stand to see her so happy because of Mark. But he couldn't stand to see her unhappy, either. So he just started averting his eyes.

But Sofia texted Holden updates about every nice thing Mark said and did. If Mark even waved at her, Holden had to hear about it in excruciating detail.

Sweet Sofia

Mark said I look pretty!!!

Mark offered me a piece of gum 😍

In ancient Southeast Asia, they used to torture the worst criminals to death with *lingchi*—slow slicing. They'd literally carve a guy up for days before letting him die. Holden had read about it before, but now he felt like he really understood it on a personal level. Every text from Sofia was a cut.

Sweet Sofia

Mark smiled at me again! He has the best smile ♥♥♥

Mark added me to his friends group chat!!! I'M FREAKING OUT!!

It was all worth it, he told himself, because Sofia finally felt noticed and wanted and lovable—all the things Holden couldn't seem to make her feel.

No matter how deep it cut, Holden tried to keep his texts back positive, or at least neutral. He wrote, "cool," and, "nice!" and, "of course he did!! ur awesome!" And he sent happy emojis that were the opposite of how he really felt. What else could he do? He'd found out the day Mark first called her that it backfired to suggest the guy was anything less than perfect. And then Sofia's fight with her mom had erased any doubt about how important it was to her to go to the dance with Mark.

He tried to believe Kelsey that fighting was normal. He tried to tell himself it was none of his business. But he couldn't let it go. He had to make sure that Sofia and her mom didn't fray apart like his family had.

Holden

r u and ur mom ok?

Sweet Sofia

Yeah–of course! we hugged it out this morning. sorry for flipping out 🙈

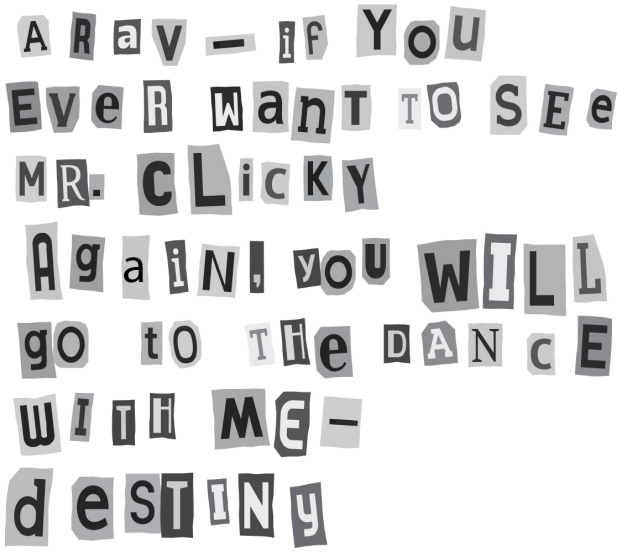
"Of course"?! It was hard to imagine a family where fighting was harmless and fleeting. A family with room for big feelings and forgiveness. Where the very next day, they could put it behind them and get back to loving each other. Maybe that was even better than the perfect way he'd pictured them before.

At school, all anyone cared about was the Winter Clincher. Everywhere Holden went, people were getting dramatically asked to the dance. At lunch, Nina Moreno stood on a table and did a cheer, complete with high kicks and

snappy arm movements. “HEY, RACHEL, MAKE SOME NOISE! WE DON’T NEED NO STINKIN’ BOYS! HEY, RACHEL, DON’T YOU SEE? YOU SHOULD GO TO THE DANCE WITH ME!”

She got a standing ovation. Even from the guys. Holden whistled and clapped with everyone else, even though his heart wasn’t in it. Rachel said yes, of course. Everyone said yes.

In band, Arav found what looked like a ransom note made out of words and letters cut from magazines. It said:



Arav turned maroon, folded the note carefully, and—refusing to look at anyone—tucked it into an inner pocket of his backpack.

Later, when Mr. Handen told them to put their instruments away, Deacon elbowed Holden. “Yo, Hellmann’s, are you seeing this? Claudette Ko’s been looking at you some kinda way for like an hour.”

“Does she look ticked?” Holden asked.

Deacon went, “Ha. Bruh, she always looks ticked.”

Holden glanced over, and immediately caught Claudette’s eye. She didn’t smile or make duck lips or anything. But one black eyebrow arched slowly upward.

Deacon didn’t miss it. He went, “You and her?”

Holden bent to put his trumpet in the case, while Deacon sang, “I fell in love with an emo girl,” under his breath. The latches on the case closed with a

satisfying double click. *Why not?* Holden lectured himself, *Stop being stupid about Sofia and just move on to somebody who's actually interested.*

The only trouble was, Sofia felt like the girl he could never move on from.

Friday was gloomy—heavy clouds blocked the sun and made the whole world look gray. Halfway through the day, Tylee asked Deacon to the dance. Or, more accurately, the entire flute section asked him for her. They showed up in study hall and played something melodramatic as background music for Tylee's spoken word poetry that ended with, "It's not that serious, D. Let's just do it."

Sofia still hadn't asked Mark. Even though Holden was dreading it, part of him just wanted to get it over with. Anticipating the hit was almost worse than recoiling from it.

He tried not to acknowledge the even smaller part of him that hoped maybe she would change her mind or just wait too long and get sniped by Ashlyn or somebody.

When he couldn't take the suspense anymore, he texted Sofia.

Holden

when are you going to ask him???

Sweet Sofia

tbd 😬

Holden

what r u waiting for??

Sweet Sofia

I'm practicing

Holden

???

Sweet Sofia

Mark found Holden in the locker room after basketball.

He held out his hand. “It’s payday.”

Holden glanced around. They weren’t alone. There were a few guys still lingering, looking at their phones, putting on deodorant, cramming stuff into their backpacks....

Holden said, “Give me a minute,” as he bent to untie his basketball shoes.

Mark exhaled impatiently. “The deal was ten a week. I’ve been so nice, it’s gross.”

“Can you shut up?” Holden hissed, pulling off his shoes. The last thing he wanted was for the whole team to know about their deal. They’d probably line up to get money, like he was a walking ATM. Or worse, they’d make sure Sofia found out. Even though he was doing this for her, he didn’t think she’d exactly thank him for it. *Would it even matter?* He told himself, *Give up. She doesn’t like you.*

“Pay up, and I’m gone,” Mark pressed.

Holden slid on his Dunks and started tying them. “A week is seven days. I’ll pay you after the school workday tomorrow.”

“No way!” Mark protested. “Obviously we meant a *school* week. I should only have to do this Monday through Friday.”

“And then you’re a jerk on the weekends? That’s not cool.”

“I have a life, you know. Weekends are extra.”

Everything Mark said made Holden furious. Being nice to Sofia was the easiest thing in the world, but Mark made it sound like a full-time job. An exhausting one. What Holden wanted to give him was a black eye.

Holden took out a ten and tossed it on the bench toward Mark. “Fine. Ten for the school week.”

It cut.

Mark took the money with a cocky salute. “Nice doing business with you.”

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The world was still a hopeless gray on Saturday morning. Holden decided to ask his mom to drive him to school for the workday. He found her sprawled in a recliner with gel patches over her eyes and AirPods in her ears. Her pregnant belly was covered by an oversized sweater.

“Mom?” he said. She didn’t stir, so he got louder. “MOM.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT,” she said, moving only her lips. “I slept like crap last night, Holden. You yelling ‘mom’ at me is *not* how we’re going to start this day.”

Holden couldn’t win. He knew that. Against all hope, he tried anyway. “I need a ride to school.”

“It’s not that far,” she said. “What’s wrong with your legs?”

Holden’s stepdad wandered in, eyes half open, and felt his way toward the Keurig machine. Holden thought for two seconds about asking him for a ride to school. But the truth was, even though they lived in the same house, he barely knew the guy. He went to get his bike.

As he rode, it felt like the sky was spitting in his face. It wasn’t quite raining, but it wasn’t *not* raining either. He thought about turning around and skipping the stupid workday. He didn’t want to go to the dance anyway. And he could really use a break from Mark-and-Sofia, Claudette, ex-girlfriends, and having to keep his Igo Big shield up all day. But he kept going because he wanted to not be at home even more than he wanted to skip all the drama.

His pocket vibrated, and he pulled out his phone, riding no-handed while he checked it.

Sweet Sofia

r u coming?? I’m all alone 😳

Even though he had decided to stop pining for Sofia, even though he really needed to get over her, he pedaled faster.

When he locked his bike up, it was the only one on the bike rack. He didn't know if that meant nobody was here yet, or just that nobody else had been forced to bike through the freezing rain.

Just inside the front doors, Mrs. Schmeckpepper sat groggily at a table with a clipboard and a cup of coffee the size of a Big Gulp. She pushed the clipboard at him, and he signed it—right under Sofia's bubbly signature with the heart dotting the *i*. There were five other people already signed in.

Schmeckpepper told him to report to the media center. Instead, he pulled up KeepTabs247 on his phone and zoomed in on Sofia's bubble. As he walked, his bubble got closer to hers. Navigating this way was like a game. The closer he got to the prize, the lighter his steps felt.

The bubbles collided at Ms. Medgar's science room. But the room appeared to be empty. Even the teacher was MIA.

"Sofia?" he called softly.

There was a *thunk*, an "ow," and then Sofia appeared from under the back corner desk, rubbing the top of her head. His heart squeezed at the sight of her.

"You okay?" Holden asked.

Sofia prodded at her scalp, not meeting his eyes. "Oh. Yeah. I'll live."

"What are you doing?" Holden moved farther into the room.

Sofia scrunched her face and held up a plastic spatula. "Ms. Medgar told me to scrape gum off the underside of desks. Then she went to get coffee."

"Now they're just being mean," said Holden. But he took a paint scraper and a plastic cup from the box of supplies next to Sofia. Looking under the closest desk, he discovered several dried lumps of gum. Nasty. After taking a second to consider the task, he decided that if he flipped the desk on its side, he would have a better angle of attack, and the gum would fall away from him instead of onto him.

When he executed the plan, Sofia called from under another desk, "Brilliant! Why didn't I think of that?"

"Girl, I got you," he said, lifting the desk she was under and tipping it over. She stood to face him as if freed from a cage, shaking her hair out and stretching her arms. Even with a gum scraper in her hand, she took his breath away.

She put her hand on her head. "Oooch. It still hurts."

"Let me see."

She tucked her chin as he stepped over the legs of the desk. "I feel like a klutz," she mumbled. But she let him part her hair and run his fingers along her scalp. Her hair smelled like a tropical smoothie and felt like satin. After spending so long cutting it before, it shouldn't captivate him now. But it did.

"Well?" she asked, "Do I have a concussion?" She straightened, flipping her hair away from her face. Their eyes caught. And they were *so close,* pinned together in the cage of the overturned desk. Holden's heart sped up.

He whispered, "Sofia?"

She blinked at him, her lips parted.

He could kiss her.

He wanted to kiss her.

"Sofia?" he asked again—her name held so many questions. *Do you want to? Are you feeling what I'm feeling? Can you forget about that other guy?* Her eyes gave conflicting answers. His heart beat like this was a three-point shot at the buzzer.

"Hm?" It was the faintest sound of longing and hesitation. She looked like a girl giving into temptation. She swayed slightly toward him. All he would have to do was lean down a few inches.

"Do you want some gum?" He slid the plastic cup of chewed gum up under her nose.

The spell was broken. She shoved him back with a shocked laugh, her face flaming red. "I will beat you with this spatula!"

His responding laugh was real and only a little tinged with regret.

He hadn't kissed her because he didn't want to do anything she'd feel bad about later. He needed her to be a hundred percent on board with it because this time, with Sofia, it *was* serious.

But the almost-kiss had added something powerful to his inventory—hope. She could fall for him if she would let herself. If she would look away from Mark long enough to see him.

He wasn't giving up. Not yet.

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Chapter 29
Sticky Situations

Sofia dived under the nearest desk and scraped furiously at its belly. What must Holden think of her? She'd tried to laugh it off along with him. But he couldn't have missed the fact that she had been practically begging him to kiss her.

What kind of girl tries to kiss one person at the same time she's planning to ask out a completely different person—the guy she's had a crush on forever? What was actually wrong with her?

At least Holden had made it clear, with the prechewed gum joke, that he didn't like her like that. So next time Reese or someone got suspicious, Sofia would be able to unequivocally deny that there was anything going on.

But there *was* something going on. Inside Sofia. Her brain and her heart were giving her wildly mixed messages.

This entire mortification spiral took about five seconds and was brought to you by the letter *H* and the number fourteen. Meanwhile, Holden must have been picking a playlist. Music interrupted her jumbled thoughts. A steady guitar riff kept pace with her still-racing heart, then crescendoed to what Sofia could only describe as the musical equivalent of punches.

"Is this that boxing theme song?" Sofia asked, daring to look out from under her desk-cave.

Holden already had three desks on their sides and was progressing up the aisle. The next desk went over as he said, "It's 'Eye of the Tiger.' And yes."

He paused to hop in place while he threw air punches—right hook, left uppercut.

Sofia could feel a giggle pushing back her self-loathing. She said, *"Why?"*

He smirked. "Do I even need a reason?"

Ms. Medgar danced through the door at that point, with a donut in one hand and a steaming mug in the other. She called over the music, "All right, guys! If I have to be here on Saturday, at least we're rockin'!"

Scraping gum was pretty fun after that. Holden did almost all the heavy lifting, even though Sofia could have managed it on her own. And using his method, she didn't have to crane her neck, scuff her knees, or risk chewed gum getting on her. Her self-condemning inner monologue was no match for his steady stream of hype music and goofy commentary.

"Do you dare me to chew this?"

"What flavor do you think this one was? It's fluorescent!"

"Is that a tooth in there?! I'm not kidding."

"You know, the Aztecs invented chewing gum."

"I'll pay you a hundred dollars to eat the contents of this cup."

"But, seriously, what are the chances I'd get a disease if I put all of these in my mouth?"

After the last desk was scraped clean and turned upright, he got her to pose with him for a selfie, leaning back-to-back and proudly brandishing their gum scrapers while making duck lips.

"Good job, you two. You make a great team," Ms. Medgar said, high-fiving each of them. "There are still two hours to go, so report back to the check-in desk for your next assignment."

As they walked together, Sofia found herself imagining taking Holden's hand. What would that feel like? What would it mean? *No! Bad Sofia!* She told herself, *You are absolutely not allowed to like two guys at the same time! And that's FINAL.*

"Holden! Sofia!"

They both turned. Mark and Ashlyn were waving them toward the vending machines outside the cafeteria.

Sharing a quick glance, Holden and Sofia changed course to intercept with Mark and Ashlyn. It was a surreal moment for Sofia. What was she doing with the cool kids? They were acting like she was one of them, but she felt like the awkward misfit with three beautiful people.

Mark wore a Chicago Bulls hoodie that looked just like one of Holden's—the super spendy official gear kind. He was shorter than Holden, though, so the sweatshirt looked too big. *Stop comparing them!* Sofia was so mad at herself. How had she become a girl with two crushes??

It wasn't possible. She wasn't falling for Holden. The almost-kiss thing was a total fluke. Besides, it had all been Holden's idea of a joke. Case closed. Problem solved.

Ashlyn greeted them with her signature radiant smile. She was the same height as Holden, taller than both Sofia and Mark. So, this close, it felt like being shone down on by a goddess. Sofia's brain went mushy.

Luckily, Holden held it together. "Sup, losers?" He struck an Igo Big pose—flexed shoulders and smoldering eyebrows.

Watching him pose made her realize how long it had been since she'd seen him act fake like that. She couldn't even remember the last time. Was that the mask he had to wear for Mark's crowd? *Stop thinking about Holden!* Sofia warned herself, sternly.

Ashlyn framed her chin with a finger gun and gave a reciprocal, "Sup." Then she dropped the pose and said, "It's total bullshoot that we have to be here, right? None of us was even part of trashing Glow Night, so why are we being punished with everyone else?"

Holden shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. It's no big deal though."

"Whatever!" Mark shot back. "They told us to deodorize the PE equipment."

Ashlyn snorted. "I was like hells to the *no*. We're just ditching and hanging out instead. Whenever a teacher comes by, we pretend we're polishing the vending machines."

She held up her hand and Mark slapped it. They shared a conspiratorial laugh.

This level of rebellion didn't fit what she knew about Mark. *Her* Mark was a straight A student, respectful to teachers, friendly, popular, and an all-around good guy. Ashlyn was clearly the instigator.

Sofia had never, in her memory, purposely disobeyed a direct order from a teacher. Lately, she had to admit, she'd been playing fast and loose with the bathroom passes and sneaking her phone out between classes. But that was

different from open defiance. Sofia was scared of getting caught. She dreaded getting in trouble. But she wanted to fit in with the blond goddess and the love of her life. So she laughed along with them.

Holden put his hands in his back pockets and joined in with a friendly—but fake—smile. "Well," he said, "we should probably—" He tilted his head to indicate going back the way they'd come.

"What? Why?" Mark pointed his heart-stopping face right at her and said, "You should hang with us, Sofia."

How could she say no?

Then he looked at Holden and held out his hand. "Oh, hey, man, do you have that ten bucks you owe me?"

For a second Sofia thought there was something really wrong. Something about this didn't make sense. Holden always seemed to have plenty of money. Why would he have borrowed from Mark? Holden and Mark didn't break eye contact, and Holden had gone perfectly still, his Igo Big confidence locked in place. They seemed to be having a high-stakes stare off.

But the next second Holden took a wad of cash from his back pocket and separated out a ten-dollar bill. Sofia must have imagined the tension between them.

"Sweet. Thanks," Mark said, taking the money and turning to the vending machine. He fed the bill into the money slot and bought a Mountain Dew.

"Get me one too," Ashlyn demanded unapologetically.

Mark pushed the button again. Then he said, "Sofia? You want one? Holden?"

Don't say you aren't allowed to drink soda, Sofia chanted to herself. But she wasn't. It was one of her mom's biggest rants: "That stuff is liquid poison. It shouldn't even be legal for children...." How would she look her mom in the eye later if she did it? She should just say *No thanks.* That's all she had to do.

"Get them both one! Let's do a chugging competition!" Ashlyn decreed.

The next thing she knew, Mark was putting a sixteen-ounce plastic bottle of Mountain Dew in her hand.

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to," Holden said quietly. Even though he had his own bottle and didn't appear to be backing out.

"Of course she wants to! It'll be fun! Right, Sofia?" Ashlyn said.

Sofia smile grimaced.

"Ready?" Mark said, twisting his cap. Sofia copied the motion, the cap came off with a soft *pop* and *fizz.*

"Set?" Ashlyn said, holding her bottle close to her lips. "GO!"

Everyone tipped their bottles. The soda slammed into Sofia's untrained mouth—an explosion of oversweet artificial flavors and intense carbonation. She swallowed and gasped at the same time, which sent the Mountain Dew back out through her airway. She choked and wheezed, her eyes watering from the burning in her sinuses, her chin and neck wet and sticky.

She couldn't see, but she heard Mark and Ashlyn cackling with laughter. And then she felt Holden patting on her back as he asked, "You okay?"

She couldn't respond through the next round of coughing. She was *not* okay.

Holden patted her back again, leaning over her close enough to whisper in her ear, "Own it. Remember?"

How in the world could she own *this* disaster?

Couldn't she just melt into a puddle here, like the Wicked Witch, never to be seen again?

But then she remembered the time she'd seen Ashlyn spit her drink on Mark in the cafeteria. She'd acted like it was hilarious and not embarrassing at all. Could Sofia possibly do that too?

She straightened up, trying to access her inner fierce girl. Coach Holden was right next to her, his hand on her back. Ashlyn laughed so hard that mascara-black tears ran down her face and, honestly, on *her* it looked cute. She and Mark clutched each other to stay standing.

Own it. Sofia slashed her bottle toward them, spraying them with sticky, fluorescent foam. Ashlyn screamed through her laughter. Mark said the third-worst word Sofia knew. Holden went, "*HO!"* And Sofia laugh coughed along with them.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE!" Mrs. Schmeckpepper bellowed from the end of the hall.

Mark said the second-worst word Sofia knew.

Ashlyn's laugh turned into a wheeze.

Sofia froze in horror. She was busted. She'd get ISS for sure, and they'd give her zeros on her assignments. She'd be barred from the winter dance. They'd call her mom at the studio, and she'd have to cancel class to pick her up. She'd probably get fired from the yoga studio. They wouldn't be able to pay their bills. They'd have to move to a shelter and beg by the freeway exit.

This was death. It was worse than death.

Holden barely missed a beat. He jogged down the hall toward the teacher, starting his explanation in transit. "Sofia was choking, and then I thought it would be funny to—"

She couldn't hear the rest, but Mrs. Schmeckpepper gave Holden a long dirty look as he finished his explanation. Then she marched him away.

Was he taking the fall for all of them? Sofia couldn't help but feel that Holden was rescuing her again. *Mark saved you twice too,* she reminded herself. *Mark saved you* first.

Mark, Sofia, and Ashlyn stood in awkward, sticky silence until Holden and the teacher returned a minute later rolling the janitor's mop and carrying glass cleaner spray.

Mrs. Schmeckpepper commanded, "Clean this up."

Sofia and Holden both went for the mop. There was a moment where they both refused to let go, but Holden was stronger, and Mrs. Schmeckpepper was watching them with narrowed eyes. So in the end it was Holden who put the mop in the squeezer thing and then dragged it back and forth across the sticky puddles. Meanwhile, Mark and Ashlyn used the glass cleaner to truly polish the vending machines they'd been pretending to polish all morning. Sofia gathered all the soda bottles and caps, and put them in the nearest trash can.

When they were finished, Mrs. Schmeckpepper said, "Let's go find you all something productive to do." She turned and strode down the hall. The four students had no choice but to follow, Holden wheeling the mop.

Sofia couldn't believe that was all the trouble they were going to get in. How was she not in the principal's office right now? All of them—except for probably Holden—deserved at least a detention. They'd been somewhere they weren't supposed to be, doing something they weren't supposed to be doing, messing up school property... and they'd been caught in the act.

Sofia shifted only her eyes to glance at Mark. Why didn't he look like he had even the tiniest guilt feeling, when she felt like an actual juvenile delinquent? Ashlyn looked equally unrepentant.

Holden cast Sofia a reassuring look and mouthed the word "Breathe." Just focusing on Holden's face calmed her jitters. It was easy to imagine him moving toward her again, leaning down, whispering her name. *WHAT WAS SHE DOING?!* She tore her eyes away and watched her feet while she trudged on. She *had* to put Holden out of her mind and get her feral teen hormones in check.

Mark elbowed her and whispered, "Schmeck's in a bad mood cuz she has to be here on a Saturday instead of at home eating her *special* brownies."

Ashlyn had another coughing fit.

Sofia forced a smile. That mean joke would, apparently, follow her forever.

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Chapter 30
The Real Clincher

It was easy for Holden to convince Mrs. Schmeckpepper that he was the one who got soda all over, not Sofia, and that the others shouldn't be punished—the teacher already assumed he was the problem. Nevertheless, she split up their group into four separate rooms for the rest of the day. Later, Sofia texted that she was going home with Destiny. Then she ghosted him the rest of the weekend.

Her silence sucked the air out of the optimism he'd felt on Saturday morning. He second-guessed everything he'd said or done that day. He beat himself up for every stray word, every missed opportunity. Maybe he should have kissed her. Maybe he should have knocked that Mountain Dew out of her hand. Told her about the deal with Mark. Gone to her house and pounded on the door until she answered.

Then, on Monday morning, he woke up to seven texts.

Sweet Sofia

sorry i didn't text u 😳 i spent the night at destiny's

and sorry i made it weird on saturday 😭

i think i'm just in a weird place and i needed to figure myself out

ur such a good friend and i don't want to lose that

i made you this… hope it helps

The next message was a video—a spin transformation that he hadn't been there for.

Sofia stood in her kitchen in her Pearl Jam shirt. She bobbed her eyebrows mischievously before spinning once. There was a glitch where the video was spliced together, and then Sofia tucked her hair behind her ear, revealing three shimmering gems.

She pierced her ears and made a video without him? He supposed she was trying to be nice, but it felt like taking a hit with an OP weapon. Like all his life and health got wiped out with one blow. The videos were supposed to be *their* thing together—Sofia's and his.

The next text was "two" in the one-two knockout.

Sweet Sofia

i'm asking mark today before school in the cafeteria 😬😳 will u come?? no pressure!! It's fine if u can't 😅

Game over.

Holden lay on his back, rereading the texts and feeling his feelings. Relief that Sofia had texted. Frustration at her vague excuse for disappearing. A despairing irony over being friend zoned by the girl he had friend zoned about ten minutes into their first conversation... and then fallen for. An overwhelming desire to throw his phone against the wall. Resentful determination to *not* go to the cafeteria this morning.

He didn't need to watch that go down.

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When he went downstairs—all of that still knotted up inside him—his mom was in the kitchen, her pregnant belly looking bigger than ever under a pajama top that said, GROWING A HUMAN—DO NOT DISTURB. She hadn't done her hair and makeup yet, and yesterday's perfect salon waves were limp and matted on one side.

She put a decaf coffee pod in the Keurig.

He remembered that, when he was little, she used to have him pick out his cereal, and then she'd help him pour his milk. She'd sit across from him and sip her coffee while he ate.

Now he was afraid to say anything to her—even *good morning* could set her off. So he silently got himself a frozen breakfast burrito, tore off the wrapper, and put it in the microwave.

"Cover it!" his mom barked. "You always make a mess inside the microwave!"

He was so sick of every single thing he did being wrong. Of being expected to leave no trace of his existence in two different houses. Of getting sucker punched by his mother's every mood and mania. Kelsey didn't act like this. Marmee didn't act like this.

He slammed the microwave door so hard it bounced back open and yelled, "You're a garbage mother!"

With a primal sound, she hurled her mug at him. It whistled past his face and shattered against the wall.

His anger stuttered in shock.

She shouted, "You don't talk to me like that! I brought you into this world!"

Holden's stepdad appeared on the stairs, wearing an undershirt, an unbuttoned dress shirt, and no pants. He looked like he wanted to start peace talks but knew it was too late.

Holden's anger roared back to life, wilder and fiercer than before. He took a step back, both fists clenched, wanting to throw something too, just to feel it smash. "I don't want to live here!"

"TOO BAD."

"I'll move in with Dad!" An empty threat. There was nothing for him there.

"You think he'd have you? Cuz he *won't*!"

"Guys," Trevor said timidly from the stairs.

"I'll call the cops!" Holden clutched his phone so hard he was surprised it didn't crumple. "I'll tell them I don't feel safe here!"

As the words were coming out of his mouth, he heard himself echoing his parents' fights. He couldn't change. He couldn't get away. He was exactly like them.

His mom burst out crying, but her words were still hot and angry. “Oh, yeah, you go ahead and do that! You know what they’ll do? Nothing! Because you’re not abused, Holden. You’re just an entitled punk!”

“Forget this!” Holden shouted, shoving a chair out of his way as he made for the door. As it clattered to its side on the tile, he snarled at his stepdad, “Enjoy the show?” Then he stormed out through the garage, grabbing his Dunks on the way. He didn’t stop to get his backpack, basketball bag, trumpet, or coat.

Even though it was a windy late November day, he was too angry to feel the cold. Jamming his feet into his shoes and his hands into his pockets, he power walked to school. He thought about stopping at the drugstore to get breakfast and then realized he hadn’t brought any money.

He went straight to the band room. There was no one there, and he hadn’t brought anything to do, so he lay on the floor on his back and doom scrolled on his phone.

Five minutes before the start-of-school bell, his feed blew up with videos of Sofia asking Mark to the winter dance.

Not only had he not avoided seeing it, he now got to see it twenty-six times from every possible angle.

In the videos, the dull roar of the crowded cafeteria morphed into sounds of “Make way” and “Move back.” Nina, Destiny, Reese, and Eve herded people to one side and the other until they’d made a path through the sea of students that led from the entrance straight to Mark. The doors were thrown open, and Sofia glided into view on Holden’s skateboard.

She was wearing a loose shirt that fell off one shoulder. Her long, layered hair streamed behind her, the peekaboo bleached chunk proof that there was more to this girl than people thought. Some of the videos were shot close enough to show the shimmering gloss on her lips, along with the brand-new addition to her look—triple piercings in her ears, two glinting rhinestones and a small silver hoop.

She executed a smooth backside kick turn and skated confidently to within six feet of Mark, where she hopped off the board and flipped it into her hands in one fluid movement—just like Holden had taught her. She held it up so that the

underside was clearly visible. Between the wheels she'd taped the words: "Go to the dance with me, Mark. I promise you won't be 'board.'"

The crowd in the cafeteria went wild—cheering, clapping, whistling. It was impossible to hear Mark over the noise, but he must have said yes, because Sofia's smile beamed, and then they high-fived.

Even though he hated every second of it, it was truly the coolest Winter Clincher Holden had ever seen.

Holden wasn't the only one who thought so.

In first hour Wormlink had to shout and threaten extra homework to get everyone to settle down. They were talking about Sofia, and everyone was pretty much saying the same thing. For the rest of the day, Holden heard it whispered in classes, shouted in the hallway, and discussed at lunch. It was in the nudges and looks that Sofia fielded in math class. And in the fist bumps and congratulations ladled onto Mark in science. It was written with Sharpie on the bathroom mirror, on notes passed from person to person, in group chats, and on the videos' comments.

Sofia Santini is a savage.

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Chapter 31
The Price of Popularity

"Oh, *hey*, Sofia," said a guy as he passed her in the hall. He had a buzz cut and dark fuzz over his lip, and Sofia couldn't remember his name because they'd literally never spoken before.

But she said "hi" and gave him a smile that made the guy next to him elbow him significantly. Which was weird, because it was a *regular* smile.

As she walked into social studies, three cheerleaders swarmed her desk.

"I love your shirt. Where'd you get it?"

"How did you learn to skateboard?"

"Have you ever thought about going out for cheer?"

She didn't have a chance to think of an answer to one question before the next one came at her, so she just shrugged and said "maybe" a lot and made the too-cool-to-care face she'd been practicing. It must've been working, because the girls kept chatting excitedly, and others rubbernecked on their way past, with a look Sofia recognized because she'd been the one giving it so often in the past. It was a look that meant, *You're so cool that you probably couldn't like me.*

The wave of popularity coming at Sofia was bigger and faster than anything she had dared to imagine. But she rode it like an Olympic surfer. Holden had taught her everything she needed to catch that wave—how to fake confidence when she was embarrassed, how to "give it back" when she got teased, how to take a compliment.

Everything she'd been through had been totally worth it—from the hours of practicing on the skateboard and the bruises on her knees, to letting Destiny stab a needle through her earlobe at one o'clock in the morning, to learning the hard way how *not* to do makeup.

It had all led to this. She'd never be invisible again. Everyone was looking at her, talking to her, talking *about* her.... Honestly, she hadn't really planned for popularity. All she'd wanted was for Mark to notice her, and now he had. Not only had he said yes to her Winter Clincher in front of practically the whole school, but in the first hour people had been high-fiving and fist-bumping him like he'd won something. She'd even overheard someone say, "Total score, bruh. Sofia got *hot."* And Mark had said, "*I know."*

It's me, Sofia thought. *I'm the win.*

Even though this is what she'd set out to do, it felt a tiny bit different than she'd imagined. She'd felt fierce for a minute this morning when she flipped that skateboard and actually caught it. But now all the attention made her feel like she was on display. She didn't love it.

Holden would help her sort it out. He'd listen and understand how she was feeling. If only she could talk to him about it.

But he'd disappeared, and it was more than a little her own fault. She'd panicked after almost kissing him. She'd spent the night at Destiny's house so she wouldn't be tempted to text him all night. And then, after watching a movie and eating way too many gummy bears, she'd *told* Destiny about it. All of it.

She'd thought Destiny would be mad or tell her she was too nice and trusting. But she'd patted her back and said, "Holden does that to people. It's not your fault. We all have a Holden phase sooner or later. The important thing is—like with other addictive substances—to 'just say no.'"

Then Destiny had pierced her ears and helped her plan out the details of asking Mark to the winter dance, while reminding her of all the reasons she'd fallen for Mark in the first place. What Sofia had been telling her friends since forever—he was smart, kind, sweet, *beautiful.*

And, yeah, Holden also came into her mind for each of those adjectives. Plus Holden was funny and tall and a good listener. But Destiny had said, very wisely, "If every single one of your girlfriends tells you a guy is trash, then *he's trash*. You can't always trust your feelings, but you can *always* trust your girls."

That's why Sofia hadn't responded to Holden's texts. And she was practicing refocusing on Mark every time Holden popped into her mind. Of course, she had told Holden she was sorry and that she cared about their friendship. That

was true. She still wanted to be friends with Holden. She just needed to be six-feet-apart friends.

But he hadn't been in the cafeteria this morning to see her big moment. And he hadn't replied to her texts. When she saw him in math, he didn't even look at her. He'd acted like he was in a soundproof bubble. Was he upset that she'd ghosted him for forty hours? Or was something going on with band or basketball... or his family?

As the clock ticked down the minutes to three thirty, Sofia decided she'd *make* Holden talk to her. While Wormlink presented fifteen "fascinating" facts about the Mississippi River, Sofia slipped her phone out of her backpack and texted Destiny that she didn't need a ride home today.

When the bell rang, it took Sofia longer than she had planned to get to the gym where the basketball team would be. So many groups waved her over to say how awesome her Winter Clincher was. So many virtual strangers wanted to give her a compliment or ask for her number. When she finally got to the gym, Brendan told her Holden hadn't shown up for practice. She checked KeepTabs247 and found his dot in front of the school. Maybe his stepmom was picking him up today and he had to go to his dad's house and that's why he seemed off.

She rushed to her locker to grab the skateboard, still hoping to catch him before he left, only to get chatted up by a few more stragglers. By the time she got to the spot where Holden had found her crying in the dark once upon a time, he was gone.

Sofia looked around indecisively. It was chilly and windy, and she hadn't worn a coat. (Her puffy coat was too babyish, and she couldn't afford a new one.) She wished she'd gotten a ride home with Destiny after all. She wished Holden's arm was around her to keep her warm.

MARK'S ARM, she corrected herself. She wished *Mark* were here to keep her warm.

Didn't she?

"Hey, Sofia, I love your skateboard," a girl said on her way past.

"Thanks," Sofia responded automatically, waking up her phone and checking KeepTabs247 again.

Holden's bubble blinked along, making slow progress away from the school. He seemed to be moving too slowly to be in a car. Maybe he wasn't even riding his bike.

Sofia looked at the skateboard under her arm—Holden's skateboard. It was going to be a cold ride.

She went to the end of the parking lot, got her bearings compared to the Holden bubble on her phone, and decided to turn right—the opposite direction of her house. After a couple of minutes of skating, she found herself skirting a gated neighborhood. She checked the bubble again—she was getting closer—and picked up speed. Her fingers were so cold they hurt. She fisted them in her armpits, which made it hard to balance.

"HOLDEN!" Sofia called when she saw him up ahead. He had nothing with him, no backpack or anything. He didn't turn. He was moving slowly all right, in what could only be described as a trudge. She'd never seen him walk like that in public or even when it was just the two of them. Swagger, yes. Trudge? No.

He looked like a person who very much did not want to get to where he was going.

The wind funneled through the space between two houses and made her shiver so hard, she almost fell off the skateboard. She scrubbed her arms through her thin long sleeves, wishing her shoulder wasn't bare at the moment. Then she pushed off and closed the distance between her and Holden.

"H-holden," she called again. Great. Her teeth were chattering.

This time he looked over his shoulder. His forehead was furrowed, and when he saw Sofia, his eyebrows pinched together even harder.

She skated right up to him, hopped off the board, and stomped on it. It flipped into her hand, just like she'd practiced. Just like Holden had taught her.

"Hi?" Holden said, not even acknowledging her incredibly cool skill.

"H-holden." Sofia tried to smile. Tried to think of something a fierce girl would say. Tried not to start crying for absolutely no reason whatsoever.

"Your lips are *blue*," Holden said. "Why aren't you wearing a coat?"

Sofia gave him a smirk-and-shrug. "Why aren't you?"

Holden rolled his eyes. "That doesn't work on me. I taught you that."

She gave up the act and redirected the topic to him. "Is this the way to your house?"

Holden looked toward the neighborhood gate as if to verify. "My mom's house," he said.

"But you d-don't want to go h-home?" Sofia asked, as another shiver racked her.

Holden made a noise that could have been frustration. He pulled off his hoodie and held it out to her. "Here."

Gratefully—and vaguely guiltily—Sofia traded him the skateboard for the hoodie and put it on. Not only was it warm from his body heat and heavy in a way that felt expensive, it smelled like his cologne or deodorant... or whatever it was that made every girl have a Holden phase sooner or later. That smell and that warmth were infusing into her, liquifying her insides.

Think about MARK.

Mark who?

Mark your forever crush. Mark your date to the winter dance. The guy your girlfriends approve of. Don't trust your feelings. Trust your friends.

"Come on," Holden said, starting to walk again, goose bumps clearly visible on his now bare arms. "You need to warm up, and your house is too far."

He led her to a pedestrian gate and keyed in the code to unlock it. They followed a curving road to where it dead-ended at a cul-de-sac with one enormous house. Sofia followed Holden up the artfully paved driveway. Again he keyed in a code, and the garage doors lifted away with the gentle hum that only rich people can afford. Last time Sofia had tried to open her garage, it had sounded like five feral cats were being murdered with a chain saw.

The garage was a wide-open space big enough for three or four cars, but no cars were actually parked there. It had a polished floor and sleek white cabinets lining both walls. Sofia was overwhelmed, and they hadn't even gotten into the actual house yet. She'd known Holden had money, but she hadn't realized he was *rich* rich.

Holden had crossed the cavern while she'd been taking it all in, and she had to scamper to catch up. *For the last time,* Sofia yelled at herself, *don't scamper.*

Meanwhile, she followed Holden through an interior door that led into a narrow room with built-in benches. Holden toed off his shoes and left them in there, so Sofia did too. The little room opened into an enormous kitchen the size of Sofia's whole house. It was pristine—not a single appliance or dirty dish to be seen on the gleaming marble countertops. Not even a smudge on the white cabinets or the oversized double-doored fridge. She couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips.

Holden glanced at her, sweeping his hand to indicate the enormous space. "Here it is," he said, sounding more like he was showing her a prison cell than a mini mansion.

"This is where you live," Sofia said, and then immediately wanted to smack herself in the brain. *Come on, be smart or funny or* something.

There was a large island in the kitchen, and on the island there was a small bundle. Holden scooped it up just as Sofia saw what it was—a Post-it note that said "Holden" stuck to a stack of twenty-dollar bills.

"Your parents just leave out piles of money for you?!" Sofia blurted, astonished. She should have been embarrassed to sound like such a noob, but she couldn't be. Not with Holden. He'd seen her house and met her mom. He already knew what her life was like.

He crumpled the money in his fist. "Your mom leaves love notes."

Sofia went, "Ha. You can't buy stuff with love notes."

Holden didn't respond, but he looked like he was struggling to make his cool-guy mask stretch big enough to cover all his sadness and anger. Why would getting money make him upset? Something was really wrong—Sofia could feel it. But she didn't know what to do.

She asked, "Where are your parents? At work?"

Holden shrugged. "My stepdad's at work. I don't know where my mom is."

"She doesn't tell you where she's going?"

"Nope." He said it so casually.

Sofia struggled to wrap her mind around that. It's not that she hadn't believed him when he told her about his family problems. She just hadn't really understood. Plus, a lot of people talked about their parents hating them. It just

meant they'd had a fight or they didn't like their parents' rules. Now, seeing Holden looking so trapped and alone in this cold, cavernous house, it felt *real.*

"Oh, Holden," she murmured, reaching out to ground him.

Before her hand made contact, he rounded on her. "What are you doing here?"

Sofia was caught off guard. "I— You," she stammered. "It seemed like there was something wrong. And I just—"

She didn't know how to explain the tangle of concern and gratitude and attraction that she felt toward him. How he could make her happier or sadder than almost any other person. How often he sneaked into her thoughts. Her friends' *No Holden* rule. The way it was possible to have a crush on two people at once, and how guilty she felt about that. How confusing it all was.

After searching and failing to find words to hold all those feelings, she settled for, "We're friends."

The shards of Holden's mask fell away, and he looked at her with such intensity that she caught her breath. His voice went raspy. "I don't want to be friends."

"Huh?" There went her brain again. Was she getting friend dumped?

"I want more, Sofia. I want *us*."

Holden's blue eyes held her in place, asking her The Question. Asking her to choose him. Her heart pounded and there were no coherent thoughts in her head. Just bits and pieces.

Holden's fingers in her hair.

Those fingers holding the detention slip he'd taken for her.

Doing dishes. Heart-to-hearts. Making silly faces and laughing. Texting past bedtime.

Holden loaning her his skateboard. Helping her up every time she fell. Teaching her to take a compliment and not to apologize for who she was.

Hugging Holden in the kitchen, the feel and the smell of him.

Almost kissing Holden in the science room.

But she'd already asked Mark to the winter dance, and he'd already said yes. She'd worked *so hard* to get to that yes. Was she really going to throw it all away?

And what kind of person would she be if she backed out now? Plus, on top of everything, her friends would all hate her if she chose Holden.

With all that jumbled in her brain, all she could say was, "But... Mark."

Holden's gaze dropped as he let out a heavy breath. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I know. *Mark.*"

"Can't we just stay friends?" Sofia pleaded.

Holden shook his head, not looking at her. "I think I'm going to need some time. Some space. I can't be friends with you right now. I'm sorry."

It was a sledgehammer to the heart. There was physical pain in her chest. How could words hurt this bad? She swallowed back a sob. Took a centering breath. "Okay," she managed. "I should... um... I should go."

She took a step back and then turned toward the mudroom and the garage.

"Sofia, wait," Holden said, quiet but firm.

She was afraid he would say something that would make doing the right thing harder. Afraid there was still more damage they could do to each other, more pain to endure. But he stayed quiet. She held herself still and tense, staring at the door. She waited so long, it got awkward—ten seconds, twenty. She would either have to bolt out the door or turn around and face him. Finally, she felt him approach.

He draped a coat gently over her shoulders and whispered, "Bye, Sofia."

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Chapter 32

I Guess You'd Call This a Rebound

555-0133

This is Claudette. I'm not into publicly debasing myself, but it would be cool to go to the dance with you.

So do you want to or what?

Holden

sure

i should warn you i'm kinda messed up in the head rn

555-0133

Who isn't?

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Chapter 33
Your Besties Know Best

"You did the right thing," Destiny assured Sofia. An animated coffee-shop background blurred the edges of her black and turquoise hair.

"Yeah. Holden's horrible," Eve agreed from the box next to Destiny's, where she appeared to be floating in outer space. She made an uncertain face, and corrected herself, "I mean, he *does* seem different, actually."

"Not helping," Destiny snapped. Then her voice softened again. "It's for the best. Trust me. It could have been sooo much worse."

Sofia had texted them as soon as she got home from the disaster at Holden's, and—because they were amazing friends—they'd all jumped on a group call right away to talk her through it.

Reese was in the bottom-right corner, apparently in a field of daisies. She said, "Mark told Jamal that a bunch of people were telling him how lucky he is that you asked him out."

Nobody bothered to mention that Reese-and-Jamal was toggled to "on" at the moment.

Nina suddenly appeared in the top-left corner, the mess of her own bedroom behind her. "Sorry guys! I was eating dinner. What did I miss??!"

Reese jumped in eagerly, "Holden Thomas asked Sofia out, like to be his girlfriend."

Nina screamed, "WHAT?! Are you kidding me?!"

Destiny said, "That is SO Holden—to suddenly be interested in you because you're popular now."

"Boys!" Nina motioned gagging herself with her finger. "They're LITERALLY the worst!"

Reese added, "Don't worry, she said no."

"Good. You're better off without him," Nina affirmed. All the friends offered "mm-hmm"s and "yeah"s.

So why did Sofia still feel so conflicted, so heartbroken? Most of all, she was worried about Holden. What if he wasn't okay?

"I can't be friends with you right now," he'd said.

She still couldn't believe she'd lost his friendship. She missed him so much, even while she talked to her girls.

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At dinner her mom said, "Should I set a place for Holden?"

"Not tonight," was all Sofia gave her. She wasn't ready to explain it all so that it made sense to her mom. But she missed him while she ate and after her mom went to work. The empty house seemed to specifically be lacking *him*.

She woke up the next day missing him. She spent fifteen minutes composing a text:

Good morning! 🥹 how r u? just want to make sure ur ok.

"I can't be friends with you right now."

She deleted the text without sending it.

At school, she was still the New Fierce Girl. Mark was still paying attention to her. He even asked her to sit with him and his friends at lunch. Sofia was worried that Ashlyn would be mad at her for asking Mark out, but she wasn't. She laughed and talked with her signature confidence, as if nothing was different. Meanwhile, Sofia picked at her food and focused on sitting like a fierce girl, making fierce girl faces, laughing at the right times, and not caring about anyone —or at least not showing it.

After lunch she caught up with her friends just in time to hear Reese say, "Jamal told me that Claudette Ko, that emo girl, asked Holden to the winter dance on the DL. And Deacon told Jamal that Claudette and Holden have had something going on for a while, so that's apparently a thing."

Destiny gave Sofia a pointed look. “See? You dodged a bullet. He had another girl on the side. What a player.”

Sofia nodded and made the too-cool-to-care face and felt sick to her stomach and hot all over.

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The next day there was a Turkey Trot instead of their afternoon classes. Because the weather was still cold and windy, the PE teachers had marked out a track in the gym. Turkey Trot, everyone knew, was really just a cute way of making the entire student body run around in a circle to get their prebreak energy out. But it was better than sitting in class.

Sofia jogged with all her girls. They had all been in Cross Country together this fall, and it felt comfortingly familiar to run with them again. Nina and Eve were the fastest, leaving Sofia, Destiny, and Reese in a mini pack behind them.

Mark sprinted, walked, and goofed around with the basketball team.

Holden walked with Claudette.

Sofia had never been good at keeping anxious thoughts to herself. So she asked the girls, “Do you think Holden was *really* with Claudette on Monday when... you know?”

“Yes,” Destiny said emphatically. “That’s a total Holden move.”

Reese said, “I mean, *maybe* they weren’t a thing, and she was just next in line. But that’s almost just as bad.”

“Such a skeeze,” Destiny agreed.

Sofia thought of Holden’s loveless house. Even though he’d asked her not to tell anyone about his family problems, she still tried to defend him. “Maybe he’s just looking for love.”

Destiny snort laughed so loud that three groups in front of them turned to see what was funny. She gestured to them to face forward.

Reese took on her wise-older-sister tone. “I know you don’t have a lot of experience with dating and stuff.” The statement clearly finished with an unspoken, *Like I do.* “But,” she continued, “you cannot defend people for mistreating you, okay? It’s super toxic.”

Had he mistreated her, though? Even if something had been going on with Claudette for a while, it was no different from what she'd been doing with Holden and Mark. Sofia still couldn't make herself be mad at Holden like her friends wanted her to be.

"Even best-case scenario," Destiny added, "where he's *totally* sincere, it took him like five minutes to get over you."

Maybe that's what hurt the most. How quick he was to ditch their friendship. Sofia told herself she wasn't allowed to care. She'd turned him down, so it was her own fault if she didn't like the outcome.

So why couldn't her eyes stop drifting toward Holden and Claudette?

Sofia had never really had the chance to get to know Claudette. They weren't in the same things. Now she couldn't stop looking at her. She was really pretty, in a goth way. She currently wore a tight black long-sleeve shirt and black jeans. Sofia had no reason not to like her. She had to remind herself of that every few minutes.

When Sofia's trio lapped the couple, her heart pulled toward Holden like there was a bungee cord connecting them. Destiny put a firm hand on her shoulder to keep her moving in the right direction. When her phone dinged, she risked getting it confiscated to check the message because she thought it might be from Holden. But it was from Mark.

Mark

let's just meet at the dance 😲 my parents think girls will ruin my gpa 🤣🤣🤣

Sofia

ur sneaking out??

Mark

i do it all the time

nbd

Sofia's stomach cramped at the idea of sneaking around behind his parents' backs. Images of getting caught with him and being screamed at by his mother flashed into her mind and made her shudder. But she couldn't sound like a fifth grader. So she bit back all her childish respect for authority and texted:

Sofia

kk - c u there

When the Turkey Trot was over, school let out for four days. Along with visiting her grandparents in Indiana, she planned to:

- Practice a hip-sway walk to use whenever she felt like scampering.
- Make plans for the dance without worrying about what Mark's mother would think.
- Put Holden out of her mind.

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Chapter 34
Be the Change

Holden couldn't help but watch Sofia leave the gym with her friends, ponytail swinging over one bare shoulder. Claudette clicked her tongue knowingly, whacked him on the back, and said, "See ya" before disappearing. His eyes were still stuck on Sofia's back when Mark and Ashlyn swaggered up.

With a defeated exhale, Holden reached into his back pocket and peeled off a ten-dollar bill. Mark grinned and reached for it. But Ashlyn wound up and punched him in the arm hard.

"What was that for?" He groused, rubbing his bicep.

Ashlyn put her hands on her hips. "You aren't still going to take Holden's money are you? Sofia's, like, an It Girl now."

"So?"

"So you're kind of lucky to be dating her. It was funny before, but come *on."*

Holden willed his voice to be flat as he asked, "You guys are official then?"

Mark gave him a cocky grin, one eyebrow dipping. *Is that what I look like?* Holden thought with repulsion. *I'm never making that face again.*

"Duh," Ashlyn filled in. "Didn't you see their Winter Clincher?"

"Yeah," Holden confirmed. *Twenty-six times.*

"So, yeah," Mark said, tracing his jaw as he spoke. "Don't worry about the deal. We're cool."

"Cool," Holden lied. He was one-hundred-and-thirty percent *not* cool with Mark dating Sofia. All Holden had wanted was for Mark to not be a jerk to her. He should take the win and be glad that Mark didn't expect to get paid anymore. But he actually felt cut off from his last connection with Sofia and from having any influence over Mark.

"Well, bye!" Ashlyn said, tugging Mark toward the door. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

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Holden hated Thanksgiving, and he had to have two of them. Those were the terms of the custody agreement. He spent the night at his dad's house and had first Thanksgiving there with his dad and Crystyn, her sister's family (including two stepcousins who were still young enough for the relatives to gush about how cute they were), and two sets of grandparents.

Even stuck at the kids' table with a second grader and a fourth grader, Holden could hear his dad and Crystyn going at each other. He called her tofurkey lots of colorful synonyms for "inedible," and she made a string of sarcastic comments about the steak he was eating. She called him a prima donna and said he was picky like a toddler. He called her a trend follower. Holden privately agreed with both of them. The grandparents pretended not to notice and complimented the potatoes.

Crystyn ended up being the designated driver to take him to his mom's house, because his dad had been steadily downing pumpkin pie martinis and cranberry mojitos since ten a.m. She spent the trip making sure that Holden knew what a sacrifice she was making and how much this was cutting into her holiday.

His mom and stepdad and two more sets of grandparents were already eating appetizers at the second Thanksgiving when Holden arrived. His biological grandfather greeted him with, "In my day, boys didn't have these sissy blond highlights and hair hanging in their faces." Then he slapped a fifty-dollar bill into Holden's hand with an amused, "That's for a haircut."

Holden smiled politely, stifling the urge to say, *Can we drive one of those newfangled horseless carriages to the barbershop?*

"Don't mind him," Grandma Joan said, slipping him another fifty, like a tip for putting up with the old man. "He just hates these family things. My goodness, look how tall you're getting!"

"And so handsome," his stepgrandma said, patting his cheek in a way that made Holden extremely uncomfortable. "Why do you want to hide that handsome face under that silly hairdo?"

That was the extent of what anyone could think of to say to him. After the obligatory comments on his appearance, everyone pretty much ignored him in favor of watching football and discussing the stock market, or whatever boring thing adults talk about.

He spent dinner with his AirPods in and his eyes on his phone. He tried not to hear Grandpa Rob say, "Why do you let him stay glued to that phone all day, Gwen? Kids don't even know how to look a man in the eyes these days."

Holden's mom snapped, "Dad, seriously? Can you just leave it alone? The digital pacifier is the only thing that keeps us all sane."

What did they want him to do, stare into his grandfather's eyes, unblinking, while they both shoveled pie into their mouths?

After dinner the grandpas and his stepdad settled in to watch football, and the grandmas took turns showing each other pictures on their iPads. So apparently it wasn't screens in general they were worried about, just his phone in particular.

His mother fell asleep in the recliner.

Holden was about to escape to his room for the rest of the night, when he noticed the huge pile of dirty dishes in the typically pristine kitchen. Spending so much time washing dishes after dinner at Sofia's house must have gotten under his skin, because unlike the previous thirteen Thanksgivings of his life, it occurred to him that someone was going to have to clean this up.

Why not him?

He wasn't allowed to practice trumpet when it might bother anyone for any reason. And it was too cold outside to shoot hoops. He'd already played every game on his phone and responded to Claudette's text about matching their outfits for the winter dance. He'd also gone to his feed, seen that he had over fifty comments on the latest Sofia transformation video, gotten depressed, and decided he'd better stay off socials for a while. Cleaning the kitchen was something to do, at least—a distraction from thinking about Sofia and how he'd lost her.

He had never loaded a dishwasher before, because Sofia's house didn't have one, but it turned out to be pretty self-explanatory. Once the plates and glasses and silverware were being robo-cleaned, he attacked the pots and pans. He discovered a scrub brush and a scratchy sponge under the sink and even some spray he'd never seen at Sofia's that promised to "lift away even cooked-on grease." It worked great, but definitely didn't meet Kelsey Santini's "all natural" standards.

Thinking about Sofia's mom and Sofia's house was sad enough. But it led inevitably to thinking about Sofia herself. Again. She hadn't texted him or tried to talk to him since Monday. He missed her to his core. But she was only doing what he'd said he wanted—giving him space to get over her.

He wasn't making much progress getting over her.

Part of him wished he hadn't told her he had feelings for her. Then at least they'd still be friends. But he wasn't the kind of guy to hang out passively in the friend zone. He had to shoot his shot.

"Hey, kid." His stepfather's deep baritone pulled him out of his own head.

"Hi, Trevor," Holden said, spraying the gravy pan with the cleaner.

"Did your mom ask you to do this?" He sounded like a man approaching a strange dog. A volume and pitch that said, *Let's all stay calm. Nobody needs to get their throat torn out*.

Holden switched the spray for the scrub brush. "No. I just wanted to."

"Wow. Okay." Trevor got out some containers and started transferring leftover food into them. As he emptied serving dishes, he put them next to the sink for Holden to wash. The two worked side by side in silence for a little while before his stepdad spoke again. "I know I'm not your dad, Holden, so it's not my place to interfere."

Holden didn't know what to say to that, so he just rinsed a serving dish and set it on a towel.

"Your mom's been through a lot and, you know, it's not easy parenting a teenager. And with the pregnancy, she's maybe a little..." Trevor's voice dropped to a whisper. *"Reactionary."* He paused as if waiting for Holden to respond. When he didn't, Trevor gestured to the clean dishes stacked on the counter. "This is going to mean a lot to her."

"Okay," Holden said. There were no more dishes to wash. He let the soapy water out of the sink and squeezed out the sponge, just like Sofia had taught him. He didn't want to seem like he cared too much about this awkward conversation, but he could tell Trevor was making an effort, and that counted for something.

"Hey," Trevor said, taking out two dry towels and handing one to Holden. "I was thinking—what if we got you an Uber account? You could take an Uber any time your mom isn't up to driving you someplace."

Holden's shoulders tensed automatically. His inner cynic flagged Trevor's offer as a glorified money Band-Aid. But, actually, Trevor didn't seem to think of Holden as a problem right now—they were just two guys helping each other do the dishes. And his stepdad looked and sounded really sincere, in an uncomfortable sort of way. It seemed like he'd been paying attention to what was going on and was genuinely trying to come up with a solution. Maybe he cared more than Holden had realized.

"That would be great," Holden conceded. "Thanks."

"Thank *you*," Trevor said, gesturing to the stack of clean dishes. He tossed the towel on the counter. "Would you, uh, want to play a little one-on-one?"

His stepdad's question had the shock value of a handwritten invite to Igo Big's birthday party. Holden tried to sound casual. "It's freezing."

"So bundle up." Trevor nudged his arm. "I'll get the basketball. Let's work off some of that pie."

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Chapter 35
Fierce Girl Problems

Sofia had never been more nervous than she was while getting ready for the dance. Her first date with Mark. A hundred thousand wishes granted.

She'd thought that having Mark for a boyfriend would leave her in a permanent state of bliss. And there were some great things. Mark told her she was pretty a lot. And he smiled at her with his beautiful face and held her hand a couple times in the hallway when no teachers were around. But, if she were being honest, the past couple of weeks had been exhausting. She felt like she had to be impressively cool and entertaining every minute in Mark's presence, and being fierce still didn't come naturally to her. It took a lot of mental energy to keep it up. It took even more energy to push away every thought of Holden and every impulse to talk to him and text him.

Holden would be at the dance tonight. Would he at least say hi?

Don't worry about that, Sofia reminded herself for the infinity-ith time. *Focus on Mark.*

She washed her face and restarted her makeup three times. She had her mom put her hair up and then take it back down and then put it *half* up.

At least there was only so much second-guessing she could do about her outfit. Everyone at the dance would be matching with their date—that was the tradition. Mark and Sofia had planned to wear nineties-band T-shirts, jeans, and Chuck Taylor All-Stars.

Eve had loaned Sofia a pair of purple Chucks—which Sofia was forever grateful for, because she definitely couldn't afford sixty-dollar shoes. The rest of her outfit was from her grandma. She'd taken Sofia out shopping the day after Thanksgiving and bought her a Nirvana T-shirt and a new pair of jeans that

Destiny had said made Sofia's butt look great. It turned out Grandma was happy to have Sofia help pick out her clothes.

The biggest hiccup came when Sofia's mom held out her pink, puffy coat, and Sofia refused to take it. She told her mom she wouldn't be cold. That she didn't need a jacket. When her mom still insisted, she was forced to say, "I can't wear that, Mom! It's a little-kid coat."

"It doesn't matter what it looks like!" Mom fired back. "It will keep you warm!"

"I'd rather freeze than be seen in that!"

"Do you know how much a new coat costs?!"

Sofia had to fight back tears—she could *not* ruin her makeup. She hated how everything always came down to money. How could she fit in if everyone else could afford nice things while she was stuck with leftovers?

Sofia's mom closed her eyes and took a few long breaths. Her shoulders relaxed. Then she went to the front closet and exchanged the pink coat for Holden's leather jacket—the one he'd draped over Sofia the very last time they had talked. After she'd rejected him. Sofia couldn't figure out how to give it back for some reason.

"Then wear this," Mom said.

"It's *Holden's*," Sofia protested, even though her mom already knew. "It would be so rude to wear it when we're not even friends anymore. Besides, what's Mark gonna think if I show up in another guy's coat?"

Mom took another Zen breath before saying, "Sofia, my love, are you sure you're going to this dance with the right boy?"

She was sure. Or at least she should be sure. She and Mark had a solid plan. Holden was with Claudette now. And every one of her friends agreed that Holden couldn't be trusted. All her secret doubts and second-guessing were just Old Sofia refusing to stay buried. And the way she missed Holden and wanted to cry whenever she thought about him, which was about a hundred times a day? That was a raging teenage hormonal imbalance. She couldn't trust those feelings any more than she could trust a boy who said he liked her one day and started dating someone else the next.

Sofia didn't wear either coat. It was fine. All she had to do was get from the warm house to the warm car and into the warm venue. (Oh, yeah—that's another reason why the winter dance was so incredibly special. Instead of being in the school gym, it was at a *venue*. Sofia was excited even though she wasn't one hundred percent clear on what a venue was.)

When Destiny's mom's Honda Pilot pulled into the driveway, Sofia's mom wouldn't let her go until she hugged and rocked her like she was leaving for her first day of kindergarten or something. Before she released her, she kissed her forehead and said, "Be grateful. Be kind. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom." Sofia gave her a quick squeeze back before slipping out the door. She strutted to the car with the hip sway she'd been practicing, hoping she looked more confident than she felt.

Destiny hopped out of the passenger side with a boisterous catcall. "GIRL, STRUT!"

"You look so cute!" Sofia exclaimed. Destiny had gotten the extensions out of her hair and was wearing it natural, in glorious kinks to her shoulders. Her face was makeup free and dewy, perfectly framed by her purple glasses. Her coat covered her shirt, but the snowflake-patterened pajama pants she wore were adorable.

After a quick hug, they both got into the backseat. Sofia shivered and held her hands in front of the heat vent. Without needing to ask if Sofia was doubting herself, Destiny spent most of the car ride reassuring her that the dance was going to be great and that she should put the H-word out of her head.

Sofia was grateful for Destiny's support and Destiny's mom's willingness to drive them places all the time. But she missed the days when their whole friend group traveled in a pack. Tonight, Eve and Andrew were together, Reese was with Jamal, and Nina was going with a girl named Rachel that she knew from student council. It was lonely without them.

And Holden was with Claudette. That made the loneliness worse. So much worse.

"Ooh, swanky place!" Destiny's mom commented as she pulled the Pilot into a half-circle driveway at a big limestone house. "I'll be here to pick you up at ten. You girls have fun and be safe."

They promised they would and thanked her for the ride before getting out. Destiny put her arm through Sofia's, and they entered the imposing double doors. Nina greeted them immediately, Rachel at her side. They were dressed in matching Wonder Woman tank tops and gold tiaras.

"We've been here for hours, setting up," Nina explained. "You're going to love this place! We'll give you the tour!"

It was, indeed, love at first sight for Sofia and the venue. She never wanted to have a dance in a gymnasium again. Inside the entrance was a big room with a dance floor, a food table, a DJ station, and an actual coat-check desk where the art teacher took Destiny's coat in exchange for a claim ticket.

During the tour, the early arrivals who were milling around greeted Sofia with way more excitement than necessary. Sofia still wasn't used to all the attention of being the New Fierce Girl.

Nina and Rachel led them farther in. Off of the main room, there were two game rooms with Ping-Pong tables, pool tables, cornhole, air hockey, and a funky old pinball machine. Ashlyn and a few other volleyball and cheer girls and basketball guys were already clumped around different games. They called to Sofia to stay and play with them. When Sofia moved farther into the room with her new friends, Nina huffed, "I guess you're too cool for us now."

She knew it was Old Sofia who still wanted to make everyone happy. What she should do, if Nina was going to be salty about her popularity, was tell her *that sounds like a you problem.* But it just felt *wrong*. So she promised Ashlyn, "I'll come back later," and took Nina's arm reassuringly.

They left the game room and continued to an outdoor patio with multiple firepits surrounded by deck chairs and paper lanterns strung overhead. It looked so cozy and romantic, except that Mrs. Schmeckpepper, Ms. Medgar, and Ms. Lim sat around one of the fires—ensuring nothing too romantic would happen.

"One more thing I have to show you!" Nina tugged them back inside toward a door with the universal triangle-dress-wearing stick figure sign.

Destiny went, "Are you seriously excited about the bathroom?"

"Just wait," Nina replied.

They pushed through the door, and Destiny breathed, "Shut *up.*"

To the left was the most lavish bathroom Sofia had ever seen. Each of the stalls had a wood-paneled door, the faucets looked like miniature old-timey water pumps, and there was a scroll-carved frame around the mirror. To the right there was a separate area with carpet, a long counter, armchairs, and a sofa.

Rachel, who had been so quiet that Sofia had almost forgotten she was with them, said, "It's too nice to be called a bathroom. We have to say *powder room*."

Sofia sighed. "I literally want to move in and live here."

They were still basking in the luxury of the powder room when everyone's phones dinged with a text from Eve that she'd arrived. The pack went to the front entrance to meet her. Andrew was taking his coat-check ticket from the art teacher. He was wearing a TEAM EVE shirt, and Eve was wearing TEAM ANDREW. The whole group of girls burst out laughing, hugging, and high-fiving them. They had managed to take one of the most epic disasters in the history of LJHS and make it a statement that they had each other's backs.

It made Sofia so happy. But simultaneously so, so sad. Ever since her break with Holden, she carried a hollowness in her soul where their bond used to be. Sometimes she could ignore it, but not now. She longed for what Eve and Andrew had.

She glanced around and found Holden standing near the snack table with Claudette. They were both dressed entirely in black, which made Holden look like an actual movie star. Claudette even had black lipstick on and a large black bow in her hair. She saw Sofia looking at them and seemed to say something about it to Holden, but he didn't turn.

Sofia turned away quickly, embarrassed that she got caught looking at the wrong guy.

While Sofia was busy making sure she stared in the opposite direction of Holden, Arav arrived wearing snowflake pajama pants and a white T-shirt identical to Destiny's. The two high-fived. Then Destiny and Arav challenged Andrew and Eve to air hockey, and they broke away from the group heading for Game Room 2.

The DJ declared into the microphone that it was time to get the party started. A moment later a trap remix of "Winter Wonderland" blared from speakers hidden somewhere in the room.

"Hey, hottie." Mark's voice made her jump, and he laughed like it was the funniest thing ever. Sofia chose to focus on the thrill of Mark calling her "hottie" rather than the sting of being laughed at. He slung his arm over her shoulders possessively. "This DJ sucks, right? What are we even listening to?"

Sofia laughed and shrugged like she agreed with everything he said. Because *his arm was around her*. This is what she'd wished and worked for, and now she had to keep him happy.

Except, she couldn't help but notice that Nina and Rachel didn't look happy. At all. Nina's nostril's flared, and Rachel's mouth fell open.

Too late, Sofia considered that this dance was something they'd worked their butts off to make happen—including crawling to Mr. Oosterbeek and begging him not to cancel it after their classmates trashed Glow Night. They'd probably picked this DJ along with everything else. And Sofia had just laughed it all off. When did she become such a jerk?

Nina snapped, "Rude much?"

To which Mark rolled his eyes and said, "Take a chill pill, Nina. Jeez." His arm tightened around Sofia as he moved them away. "Come on, Sofia. Let's go find everybody."

She cast a parting look at Nina, trying to say *sorry* and *see you later* and *I love you* and *please understand* all at once with just her eyes. Then she focused on keeping pace with Mark.

She knew that "everybody" really meant his group. Like her friends were nobody. She felt herself shifting from the person she was around her friends to the girl she needed to be around *his* friends. She ran through the rules in her head: *Give it back, do not care, don't apologize, punch when necessary. Don't sound like a kid. Sip soda. Pretend you get the jokes. Don't be too nice. Strut, don't scamper.*

For some reason her mom's voice intruded: "Be grateful. Be kind."

That did not fit in with her new rules. Grateful and kind weren't *fierce*.

Sofia was starting to feel like two totally different people: her mother's daughter and the fierce girl. And those two people didn't have much in common. They didn't even really like each other.

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Chapter 36
Revenge of the Exes

"They're about to walk past," Claudette ventriloquist whispered. "Don't look over."

Holden couldn't believe Claudette had not only been understanding when he'd told her about Sofia, she'd gotten really into it. She'd asked probing questions until it was awkward and didn't seem to care that he wasn't interested in her. When he'd asked why, her only explanation was, "Hopeless, unrequited love is my third favorite thing. After arthouse horror and sour gummy worms."

He'd said, "Yeah, but you've been giving a vibe—I thought you liked me."

Claudette had rolled her eyes and said sarcastically, "How will my broken heart ever recover?" Then she looked him up and down. "I mean, you're hot and rich and obviously have mommy issues—so I would totally make out with you. But there's other fish in the sea."

Then she'd declared that she would be his bodyguard-slash-wingwoman at the winter dance.

So here they were, making sure Holden didn't accidentally give Sofia puppy-dog eyes while she paraded past with Mark's hecking arm around her in their disgusting matching T-shirts.

Holden was glad he'd worn all black. He was in a dark mood.

"Okay, they're gone."

"I owe you a year's supply of gummy worms," Holden muttered.

"I accept."

He twisted open a water bottle—the only drink available that Kelsey Santini would approve of—and took a long swig. "Ice Ice Baby" came on, and it must have been one of the DJ's favorites, because he cranked the bass way up.

As Vanilla Ice rapped, "Turn off the lights, and I'll glow," Holden's phone lit up with an alert that he had been tagged in a post by Igo Big.

The water caught in Holden's throat and sprayed out all over his phone, the floor, and Claudette's combat boots. Still coughing, Holden dried the phone screen off on his shirtsleeve and looked again. He clicked through and found that Sofia's three transformation videos had been spliced into one and looped. In Igo Big's version, Sofia spun and spun, transforming her hair and her outfit, and adding makeup and earrings. Igo Big had added a voice-over of himself reacting: "Oh! Oh, girl! Who woulda guessed it was possible to transform her from that mousy little thing?" And there was a caption that read "@Holden_it_down is a maestro of the makeover, god of the glow up."

In the time it took for Holden to wrap his mind around what was happening —that Igo Big had boosted his posts about Sofia—the likes on the post began to spin up... 12, 35, 52, 183.... Next came the notifications of new followers, filling up his screen like popcorn. And people tagging him in the comments asking Holden to give *them* a glow up. If this was what the first one minute after boosting was like, how many likes and follows would he have by tomorrow?!

"Um, did you just break the internet?" Claudette took his phone and held it in both hands at arm's length, as if its magic was powerful and untamed.

Holden took the phone back and put it on airplane mode. He couldn't decide what to do about that right now, but he knew for sure that he didn't want to do any more glow ups. For the life of him, he could not remember why he thought it would be important to get a boost from Igo Big. All those likes and followers, they weren't real. They weren't true friends who knew him and cared about him. Their approval meant nothing. He'd thought it would feel amazing to be trending online, but as it turned out, he still felt empty.

"INCOMING," Claudette yelled over the music, her voice as deadpan as ever.

What now? Holden lowered the phone and came face-to-face with Destiny. She was glaring at him with undying hatred, of course.

"YOU'RE BLOCKING THE WHOLE DRINKS TABLE," she shouted over the music. "AND WHY IS THE FLOOR WET?!"

Holden took a step to the side. His first impulse was to walk away or block her bad vibes with every Igo Big trick he could muster. But then he thought about the few weeks they had dated last summer and how they'd broken up. And he realized that if he was really going to be a better person, he had to deal with the damage he'd done in the past.

He cleared his throat. "DESTINY? CAN WE TALK?"

Destiny shot him criminal side-eye, which was somehow intensified by her glasses, while pouring Sprite into a plastic cup. "WHAT COULD WE POSSIBLY HAVE TO TALK ABOUT?"

"PLEASE?"

Destiny sighed dramatically before nodding once. She led him outside with a definite *let's get this over with* stride. Claudette joined them, shrugging. The music was much quieter on the patio, and only a few couples were out here, along with three chaperones who seemed absorbed in their own conversation. Destiny didn't sit. She popped her hip and crossed her arms. "What?"

Holden's collar felt too tight. He pulled at it before forcing his hand down and his eyes to meet Destiny's. "I, um, I'm sorry about last summer."

Destiny's lips puckered skeptically.

"You're a great person, and you don't deserve to be treated like that."

Destiny's hands went to her hips. "You dumped me before I left for camp because you said you didn't want a long-distance relationship. I was gone a *week*."

Claudette blurted, "HA!" Destiny shot her a look before retargeting Holden with her glare.

Holden jammed his hands into his pockets. "I was selfish. I'm trying to change."

"By the time I got back, you were dating Yvonne Leichtman."

Holden admitted, "I know."

"You broke up with me on a text and then blocked my number."

Ouch. That really was uncalled for. He didn't like remembering it because it made him feel like a scumbag. He just hoped he was making progress at sucking less.

He hung his head. “That was so immature. I should have had the guts to talk to you.”

There was a beat of tense silence before Claudette started slow clapping. Destiny turned on her. “Girl, what are you even doing here with him? Do not fall for his ‘I’m a better person now’ act. I know for a fact he made a play for Sofia a hot minute before you two got together. *After* she’d already asked Mark out.”

Holden’s heart clenched in protest against that description. It wasn’t untrue, but it was the worst possible interpretation of what had really happened.

Claudette stopped clapping. “Oh. Yeah. I know. He told me.”

“He *told* you?”

“We have no secrets,” Claudette whispered mysteriously. Then she made a noise of contempt. “No, seriously. I’m just here as the wingwoman for my heartbroken broski. We’re not a thing.” She gave Holden an affectionate noogie. “Maybe give him another chance. I can’t believe I’m telling you this, but last year —” Her voice dropped dramatically. “Last year, I wore *pink*.” She shook her head. “I’m not proud of it. People change. That’s what I’m saying.”

Destiny’s shoulders relaxed and she let out a heavy breath. “I guess. I mean, I changed too. To tell the truth, I was in a real boy crazy phase last summer. I kissed this guy at camp, and I literally don’t even remember his name.”

The confession brought a chuckle of relief from Holden and a fist bump from Claudette.

“We were wondering where you went,” Eve called from the patio doors. She came out, followed by Andrew and Arav. “Destiny, you disappeared halfway through the air hockey game! I had to beat these two by myself.”

“Sorry.” Destiny waved her hand toward Holden. “Believe it or not, we were having a heart-to-heart. Turns out he has one.”

“Ouch, girl,” Holden grabbed his chest and made an exaggerated Igo Big face —just for old time’s sake. Everyone but Claudette laughed.

At that moment Ashlyn, Yvonne, and Tylee burst onto the patio and brushed past them on the way to the chaperones.

“Um,” Ashlyn said, looking from teacher to teacher. “I think there’s some people vaping in the lounge next to the girl’s bathroom.”

All three teachers immediately got up and stormed the door, like a team of special investigators. The instant they were out of sight the girls dissolved into giggles. Tylee blew Holden a sneering kiss, and Ashlyn tapped away on her phone.

A few seconds later, Mark and Sofia appeared—his arm firmly around her as she shivered in a thin T-shirt and no coat. She didn't even seem to notice Holden and the others.

Holden felt like that creature from *Alien* was clawing its way out of his chest cavity.

Instead of taking her to one of the firepits to warm up, Mark guided Sofia to the farthest end of the patio, where a pillar partially blocked them from view. Maybe the worst part was that he low-fived Ashlyn on the way past.

Everything in Holden wanted to tackle Mark to the ground and kick dirt in his face. But Sofia had made her choice very clear. She wasn't Holden's girlfriend, and she definitely wasn't his kid sister. She had to be allowed to live her own life.

Claudette leaned close so only Holden could hear. "If you want to do some revenge kissing, I'm here for it."

"Thanks, but I'm trying to quit," Holden said.

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Chapter 37
A Salvo of Truth Bombs

"You look really pretty tonight," Mark said, studying her—finally focused only on her. "It's wild how much you've changed."

Sofia hugged herself and shivered. Partly from the cold, but also from nervousness—because she was pretty sure why Mark brought her out here "where it's quiet" and that she might be having her first kiss any second.

Mark wrapped his arms around her. "I'll keep you warm."

Instead of hugging him back, she let her arms stay pinned between them where they'd be warmest. She tried to relax into his hug and enjoy this dream-come-true moment. But in her dreams, he smelled different—not like drugstore body spray. It wasn't horrible, she told herself. It just wasn't...

Holden.

She pushed the thought away by reminding herself of all the reasons she wasn't allowed to think it.

She laid her head on Mark's shoulder. It was more awkward than all the times she'd done it in her daydreams. His real-life shoulder was a little lower and bonier than what she'd imagined. And there was a moment of decision she'd never thought about, when she had to turn her head toward him to breathe on his neck or away from him so her hair was in his face. She chose to turn away.

With her head turned, she had a good view of all the people on the patio, on the other side of the pillar Mark had parked them by. Destiny, Ashlyn, Tylee, Claudette, Eve, Andrew, Arav... even Holden was there. Sofia could see their features flickering in the firelight, while she stood in a shadow. Above them, paper lanterns lit up the sky.

I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.

Sofia knew what that meant now. She'd become what she'd wanted—an Official Fierce Girl. But along the way, it felt like she'd lost herself. She wasn't truly sure who the real Sofia was anymore. She couldn't—and wouldn't want to—go back to being shy, awkward, insecure Old Sofia. But she didn't want to be New Sofia after all. New Sofia was mean and selfish and totally fake.

There was suddenly a lump of regret in her throat she couldn't swallow.

Mark pulled back just a little, and she lifted her head so they were looking at each other. He was still so pretty—beautiful bone structure, black hair falling across his forehead and brushing his jaw. But there was no swell of romantic music as their eyes met. No moment where their souls entwined. He just said, "We better do this before the chaperones come back." And then he leaned toward her, angling his head a little so their noses wouldn't bump.

"Wait!" Sofia pushed against him, giving herself a little space—just a few inches and one extra second—to think.

She'd changed everything about herself and become someone she didn't even like. For this boy. Before that, he'd barely looked at her.

Actually, some of the changes felt like the real her, the person she wanted to be. She loved riding a skateboard and learning to laugh at herself. She loved her hairstyle and her new thrifted clothes. And she was proud of pushing past her shyness to get here.

But she didn't love cutting people down and laughing at Mark's mean comments and always, always trying to impress him and his friends, pretending to be cooler than she really was. She hated it. She hated disrespecting their parents and talking crap about teachers. She hated that she let him cheat off her. She hated Mountain Dew.

She couldn't blame Mark for any of it. He hadn't asked her to change. And, if she was worried that he didn't like the real her, well, she'd done the same thing to him. Hadn't she? She'd had a crush on the person she wanted him to be instead of who he really was. She'd created a Dream Mark for herself—a kind, heroic, respectful, straight A student—and then refused to see any of the evidence that Real Mark wasn't that guy. She wasn't in love with Real Mark. Now that she was being honest with herself, she couldn't think of one thing deeper than his pretty face that she liked about Real Mark.

"I'm sorry," Sofia said, her voice surprisingly steady and sure. "I don't want to do this."

Mark's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"I don't want to kiss you or date you or anything. I'm sor—" Sofia caught herself apologizing and smiled. "I'm *not* sorry."

Mark let her go, not only taking a big step back but pushing off her so she stumbled to keep her balance.

Loud enough for everyone to hear him, Mark said, "Whatever. Like I care. I only started being nice to you because Holden Thomas paid me to do it."

His words hit Sofia like a shock wave. She gasped, *"What?"*

There was a murmur in the group by the firepit that turned to a rumble. Ashlyn hastily positioned her phone to record Sofia, looking hopeful that she'd do something shocking enough to break the internet. Tylee and Yvonne's giggles were equal parts surprise and meanness. Destiny and Eve stood frozen in shock that mirrored Sofia's.

Mark was already rejoining Ashlyn, leaving Sofia unsheltered from the night air. But Sofia didn't feel cold at the moment. She felt hot all over. Like she was standing right in the fire.

Her eyes found Holden's across the patio, and she forced her voice to carry to him. "Is it true?"

The *caught* look on his face was her answer.

"Do you have that ten bucks you owe me?" They'd done it right in front of her face.

Her stomach clenched and tears pushed at the back of her eyes. How could she be so gullible?

Holden's betrayal was so much worse than Mark's sudden rejection. She'd been mourning the loss of Holden for days, second-guessing turning him down, wishing they could get their friendship back. All the while, she never suspected that he'd been... what? She didn't even have a word for what Holden had done. Why would he humiliate her like this? Why would he make her a joke to the whole school?

She choked out, "How could you?"

“He did it for the likes, of course,” Tylee offered, taking a step forward and holding out her phone so that Sofia could see herself spinning and spinning, while Igo Big’s voice said, “Who woulda guessed it was possible to transform her from that mousy little thing?” It had over three thousand likes.

“Thing,” he called her. “Mousy little thing.” Was that all she was to Holden—a thing, a project, and a way to get followers? Did he really think she was so hopeless that the only way someone would date her was if they got paid to? She pushed Tylee’s phone away, overwhelmed by too many feelings—humiliation, rejection, betrayal.

She saw Holden’s lips form her name, but the combined noise of the party inside and the buzz of drama on the patio drowned out his voice. Sofia had a choice. She could either melt down here in front of Holden and Mark and everybody, or she could run away and hide and melt down all alone.

Sofia ran.

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Chapter 38
Frenemies Assemble

Holden got one step toward the door Sofia had disappeared through before he was spun around by the arm. Destiny had a hold on him, and she looked furious. Amidst the cacophony of accusations, incredulous questions, and name-calling, Destiny's voice was the loudest. "What is your freaking problem?!"

Eve punched him in the other arm, in a very unfriendly way. "Why couldn't you just leave Sofia alone?"

Arav and Ozdemir bared their teeth at him. Tylee gave him L fingers and a satisfied smile. Nina burst onto the patio looking murderous. She was followed by Reese and Jamal, who were dressed in matching hockey jerseys. All three demanded in unison, "What happened?"

The last known person to be tarred and feathered, Holden knew, was in 1981. But there was a pretty good chance his classmates were about to resurrect the punishment for him tonight.

Ashlyn, who was back at Mark's side, waved her arms at the angry mob. "Guys, it's not that serious. Settle down. Holden paid Mark to date Sofia or whatever. It was hilarious. Plus, Mark stopped taking the money a couple weeks ago."

Holden wished she'd not help.

Destiny knuckle smacked the back of his head.

"Ow!" Holden yelled, his hands reflexively raised in self-defense. "Can you just let me explain?!"

Ozdemir growled, "Nobody believes anything you say, Holden."

Tylee gave a triumphant "Ha!"

Mark muttered, "Facts."

But Claudette said, "I wanna hear it."

"Fine. Start talking," Destiny ordered, shoving him in the chest with both hands so that he sat down hard in the deck chair behind him. "But every time you say something I don't like, I'm going to slap you so hard, your—"

The doors opened, and the chaperones stepped back onto the patio. Destiny smiled and waved at them, as if she hadn't just been threatening anyone's life. They nodded to her and went back to their seats around the far fire.

She turned back to Holden, "TALK."

"I was trying to help. Sofia had such a huge crush on Mark, and she was so torn up every time he was a jerk to her."

"Hey!" Mark protested. "I'm just trying to live my life. It's not my fault that girl needs a restraining order."

"YOU"—Destiny stuck her finger an inch from Mark's nose—"zip it."

Mark muttered, "Forget this" and moved to leave, but Ashlyn held a fistful of his jacket and planted her feet. "It's just getting good."

Destiny snapped her fingers at Holden, and he restarted. "I tried talking to him—"

"After you assaulted me for no reason," Mark interjected. "You almost got me kicked off the basketball team the first day."

"Shut your face, Chen," Nina threatened quietly, "or I'll shut it for you."

"Be nice," countered Ashlyn. "It's not *his* fault."

"Anyway, when negotiating didn't work," Holden continued, "I did the only thing I could think of. I paid him off."

Now that he said it out loud, he realized how bad it sounded, and maybe how much therapy he needed. He'd done the same dysfunctional thing his family always did—thrown money at a problem and called it fixed. But he honestly didn't know what else to do. With a moan, he let his face fall into his hands.

"Whatever," Mark spat into the postconfession quiet. "It wasn't worth it."

"Boy, you better walk away," Destiny snarled.

"I was already leaving," Mark retorted. "Come on, Ashlyn."

"Yeah, let's go," Tylee agreed.

Mark, Ashlyn, Tylee and Yvonne went inside, shutting the patio door behind them with a *bang*.

A moment of silence followed their departure. Arav's voice was the first to cut through it. "I don't get it. Why did you get involved in the first place?"

Reese spoke up for the first time. "Arav, I know you don't have a ton of experience with dating and stuff, but *come on.* He's obviously in *deep*." When Arav looked uncomprehending, she said, "He *likes* her, pumpkin."

All eyes turned on Holden, and he confirmed Reese's words with open palms and a defeated, "Yup."

The whole group seemed to inhale together. Ozdemir drummed his palms on his thighs. Destiny went *hmmmm.* Eve's foot jittered against the patio tile for a second before she said, "I'm going to try to find Sofia."

Destiny said, "I'll come, too."

Holden felt a hand on his shoulder. When he looked up, he found Arav looking at him sympathetically. He said, "I'm not sure what I would have done in that situation."

"Yeah," Oz admitted. "At least you *tried* to help."

"Thanks, guys," Holden mumbled through the shock of Ozdemir saying something nice to him.

Nina sighed. "Okay, so now what? We need a plan."

Holden's words were raspy. "I don't know. She hates me now."

Nina dropped into the seat next to him and kicked his shoe like *Stop feeling sorry for yourself*. "Sofia has never hated anyone in her life. But you might have broken her for real."

"What am I gonna do?" Holden asked miserably, mostly talking to Somebody up there, since he was pretty sure nobody in this circle could help.

After a beat where everyone seemed just as lost as Holden felt, Andrew Ozdemir, of all people, cleared his throat. "Holden, have you ever heard of a grand gesture?"

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Chapter 39
How to Get Your Crush to Fall for You

Sofia found shelter in the powder room. She curled into a ball on the lavish couch and cried all her makeup off. Old Sofia would have stayed huddled here until the dance ended, trying not to need anything or inconvenience anyone. Now she was fierce enough to get help.

She texted her mom.

Sofia

i'm sorry i know you're working but can you come get me please? I want to go home

Mom

On my way

Sofia tucked the phone away and went back to sniffling and hiccupping. That's how Eve and Destiny found her when they burst through the door.

"Hey, Sof," Destiny cooed, perching next to her on the couch. "Are you okay?"

Sofia shook her head and hiccupped. Eve found a box of tissues on the marble counter and handed it to Sofia. "I'm so sorry Mark turned out to be a jerk," she said gently.

Sofia mopped her face and blew her nose. "I don't care about Mark. I think I've been over him for a while, but I just couldn't admit it to myself."

"Seriously?" Destiny's mouth and eyes were all wide with surprise.

Sofia took a shuddering inhale.

"So this is only about Holden?" Eve guessed.

Sofia nodded miserably. "And please don't say I told you so or tell me what a jerk he is. I know you guys mean well, and I love you for it. And I should have listened to you. But just don't say it right now. Okay?" She sobbed again. Her friends rubbed her back and let her cry for a minute. They weren't mad at her for standing up for herself or for going behind their backs with Holden. She wished she had trusted them with the truth sooner.

When Sofia's sobs had subsided into shuddering breaths, Destiny said, "I should have trusted your judgment more, Sof. Fact is, I think I was wrong about Holden."

Sofia almost gave herself whiplash, twisting to look at Destiny.

Her friend gave her a half-hearted smile. "I should have let that stuff between me and him go a long time ago. It sucked, but its *junior high*. What did I expect? And, you know, the thing is, he *has* changed. I think you're a good influence on all of us." Her smile went wide.

Sofia's heart lifted at Destiny's words. But then twisted again when she remembered Mark's sneering confession. Igo Big's commentary on the boosted video. Holden's silent admission of guilt. She cried, "He *paid* Mark to date me. Like I'm a freak... an experiment or a bet or something. So he could get famous on the internet." The word ended on a gasp-and-sob.

Eve smoothed Sofia's hair. "Yeah. He did. But I think it was more like a huge mistake than an evil scheme. He just didn't want Mark to be mean to you."

"He even *fought* Mark for you," Destiny added. "I think he really just wants you to be happy. He can't help it that he's a flipping idiot. But, you know, maybe he's starting to grow out of it."

Sofia's poor heart had taken such a beating tonight that she was having trouble processing this new emotional fork in the road. Holden got in a fight and never told her about it? When did everybody else find out? And the cookie in the kids meal was Destiny defending him. It went against everything Destiny had been saying for months. Sofia protested, "I thought you guys hated him! You told me to trust my friends, not my feelings."

"Well." Destiny shrugged.

"And what about Claudette? He's a player for dating her. Right?"

Destiny blew her lips out. "Actually, she told me they're not dating."

A new salvo of feelings hit Sofia—shock, relief, guilt—and produced another loud sob. "I'm not a *thiiing*," she wailed.

Eve shushed her and patted her back until Sofia's phone chimed with her mom's **I'm here** text.

Sofia hugged her friends goodbye and hardcore scampered to her mom's car—no shame. Or, at least, very little shame. Her mom pulled away the same instant Sofia clicked her seat belt, as if they were fleeing the scene of a crime.

"What happened? Are you okay?" Mom glanced back and forth from the road to Sofia's ravaged face.

"I'm not injured or anything." Sofia sniffled. "I'm just... confused and... sad."

"Tell me everything."

It took Sofia a long time to get the whole story out. It didn't help that her mom kept interrupting to ask clarifying questions. When she got to the part about realizing she didn't want to kiss Mark and pushing him away, Mom went, "*That's* my girl!" And then when she told her what happened next, she yelled, "HE DID WHAT?!" But retelling the story shot for shot was therapeutic, and by the end, Sofia felt less like her whole life was ruined forever.

"Wow," Mom responded. "No wonder you're sad and confused. I'm sorry growing up is so hard sometimes."

"What should I do? About Holden?" Sofia asked.

Mom's answer came slowly. "I'm not sure what to tell you, Sof. You *did* agree to posting those videos. But I honestly can't imagine what he was thinking, paying Mark off. I'd say Mark is equally at fault for taking the money. And *you*. I'm really concerned that you tried to change yourself for a *boy*. Don't you know how lovable you are?"

"*Now* you tell me," Sofia said, and they both chuckled through tears even though it felt like an ultra-heavy weighted blanket was settling over her. "I want a boyfriend—when I'm ready—who likes the real me. I don't want to ever play a part for somebody again."

Mom reached over and held her hand. "My daughter, you are wise beyond your years."

Sofia laughed sadly, as fresh tears pooled and spilled over. "Why does being wise make me so sad?"

"Oh, Sof." Mom's voice cracked. It sounded like she was absorbing all Sofia's sadness into her own heart. At least they were almost home.

Sofia's incoming text alert dinged, and a message from Destiny popped up.

Destiny

L 👀 K!!!

The next message was a link, which took her to the page for @Holden_it_down. But there was now a pop-up message that said: "This account is private."

Sofia

why did Holden make his account private???

Destiny

why do you think??? because he doesn't want all the Igo Big followers.

did you see the other thing?

Sofia

???

Destiny

the thing he posted

hang on

A few seconds later a DM popped up:

@Holden_it_down has invited you to view a private post

Sofia read the text thread to her mom, finishing with, "Destiny must be sitting right next to Holden." *There* was a sentence Sofia never thought she would ever, *ever* say.

"Well?!" Mom said. "Are you going to click it?"

With a deep centering breath, Sofia clicked the notification from @Holden_it_down and found herself watching something very familiar—a spin transformation. It was her, but she was going backward—what used to be the end of the last video was now the beginning:

Sofia smiled at the camera from her kitchen with her new clothes, new hair, and new piercings. Then it rewound, and the earrings were gone. She spun again and her concert tee turned back into her old Bee Kind shirt. And then her hair went from layered and bleached to long, straight, and boring. By the end of the rewind video, pretransformation Sofia looked shyly at the camera and said, "Should I do it?" Then the video froze, and Holden's voice said, "This is when I fell for you, Sofia. Before you changed at all, you were already the best thing that ever happened to me."

It cut to Holden, on the patio at the winter dance, paper lanterns behind him and half the school crowded around. He looked so beautiful and so sad. "Sofia," he said, "I messed up. But I never meant to hurt you. I thought I could buy you happiness but—"

He paused, and from the clump of people nearby, a guy named Deacon called, "Sing 'Can't Buy Me Love.' Then Jamal suggested, "Say you're sorry for everything. Tell her you're an idiot."

Holden laughed and swiped at his eye. "I am an idiot. But I'm smart enough to know that you are the kindest, most beautiful person I've ever met. I don't care about likes anymore or acting like Igo Big or impressing anyone. You're the only like that matters. You're my person. You're my home. So I was wondering... if you could ever give me another chance?"

The video ended, with the little circle arrow instantly suggesting she watch it again.

At some point while Sofia was glued to the video, Mom had pulled the car over. She was leaning into Sofia's space, staring at the phone. They looked at each other in stunned silence for a long beat.

"Mom," Sofia breathed, too overwhelmed with emotions to find any more words.

"Your call," Mom whispered.

Sofia didn't have a plan. She didn't know what she was doing or how anything would turn out. But she knew that if she wasn't brave tonight, she would regret it forever. "I need to go back!"

The moment the words were out of her mouth, her mom pulled a U-turn so hard that the tires squealed and Sofia's seat belt locked.

Even with Mom harnessing her inner race-car driver, it took almost fifteen minutes to get back to the venue. Sofia played the video on repeat, until she had committed it to memory. Then she cleaned her face with one of the organic-cotton baby wipes that Mom kept in her center console and brushed her hair with the travel brush from Mom's purse.

It was happening again—the thing where there were just too many emotions all at once. Nervousness. Excitement. Fear. Hope. She focused on taking calming breaths like her mom always did. Exhale. Inhale.

Eyes on the road as they sped along, Mom said, "What are you going to do? When we get there?"

"I honestly don't know," Sofia admitted. Exhale. Inhale.

"I support you, whatever you decide," Mom reassured her, stopping hard at a deserted intersection. "I'm one hundred percent Team Sofia." She peeled out, accelerated down the straightaway, took a sharp left onto the semicircle driveway, and whipped into a space clearly meant for motorcycles right in front of the venue.

Sofia jumped out of the car and ran inside, knowing her mom would be close behind her. Holden stood alone in the middle of the dance floor, eyes on her. Everyone else—even the chaperones—stood watching from the edges. It was eerily quiet, as if the whole school were holding its breath.

Sofia froze, taking it all in. Telling herself to breathe. Exhale. Inhale.

Whatever happened next was going to happen with the whole school watching. Old Sofia would have scampered out of the room and hidden in the coat check. Literally.

Even now, her heart thumped faster than a trap mix, and her hands felt kind of buzzy.

Holden waited, not moving, letting it be her choice.

Behind her, Mom said, "You got this, Sof." In her peripherals, Destiny, Nina, Reese, and Eve pumped their fists in silent encouragement.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Run.

She threw herself into Holden, burying her face in his neck, holding on to him with all her strength. Her momentum spun them both around as he caught her.

The school went bananas. Hooting, whistling, and cheering, they rushed the dance floor as "Sunroof" blazed out of the DJ station. Sofia and Holden found themselves in the center of an instant mosh pit. Holden grabbed Sofia's hand and they bounced their way toward the edge of the chaos until they could slip out onto the patio. As soon as they were outside, he wrapped her in another tight hug.

"I'm sorry, Sofia," he breathed into her hair. "I'm so sor—"

"STOP." She pulled back just enough to cover his mouth with her fingers. "Hot guys don't apologize."

Holden smiled under her hand. "Sometimes they do."

She snaked her arm back around his neck. "Okay. But I already forgive you."

"I'm afraid to ask." Holden searched her face anxiously. "But... what about Mark?"

"You want me to forgive Mark?" Sofia asked. Holden's fingers dug into her ticklish spot, and she scream laughed, "I don't like him!" The tickling stopped, and she gasped, "I like *you*."

"You have no idea how long I've been wanting you to say that." His arms wrapped her up again. He felt right. He smelled right. She could stay like this

forever.

"Okay, you two. That's enough of that." Mr. Oosterbeek stood at the patio door, arms crossed and expression stony—completely indifferent to young love.

Sofia regretfully released Holden. They shifted to the minimum school-event-appropriate distance, but Holden took her hand, spun her around and caught her a few times as the final chorus of "Sunroof" drifted out from the dance floor. He spared a nod and a single wave for Mr. Oosterbeek.

Sofia's mom slid through the door and held out a hand to the principal. Sofia heard her mom introduce herself, as Holden danced her farther from the principal. She knew her mom was giving her an assist. By the time the song ended, Eve and Andrew, Destiny and Arav, Reese and Jamal, Mateo, Nina, Claudette, and Deacon had all trickled out to the patio, creating a buffer between Holden and Sofia and Mr. Oosterbeek's stringent chaperoning.

The DJ also seemed to be on their team. The next song that came on was a slow and soulful version of "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Perfect for slow dancing.

As they swayed, Sofia said, "Holden, I feel like a half-baked cookie. I think, I hope, that I'm turning into something really good. But I'm not done baking. I'm still changing and finding myself."

"Me too," Holden said regretfully. "I'm probably going to mess up a lot, but I'm really trying to figure it out. Maybe when I'm thirty, I'll be good enough for you."

Was he saying let's press pause on this for fifteen years or so? Old Sofia would have said okay and then cried herself to sleep for weeks. And Grown-Up Sofia—who would someday be mature and patient and have great judgment—would say, *I'll wait for you. I'll give you all the space and time you need.*

But Now Sofia hated that idea. She hated it so much. Now Sofia was going for what she wanted.

She counteroffered, "Or maybe we could figure it out together. Because I really want you to be my boyfriend."

Holden's response was to throw his head back, shake his fists at the sky, and roar, "*GAH!*"

Their friends stopped dancing and talking to look at him. Sofia dropped her hands, completely thrown by his reaction. “What?!”

“I just wish this dance wasn’t chaperoned like a thirteenth-century convent, *so I could kiss you*.”

Everyone but Oosterbeek cheered and hooted.

A shiver of anticipation went right up Sofia’s spine. “Does that mean yes?”

Holden reached out and slipped his hand around hers, intertwining their fingers. Now the shiver shot through her fingertips and down to her toes. He dipped his head low, so that his hair brushed her forehead, and his next words were only for her.

“That means yes, Sofia. *Yes.*”

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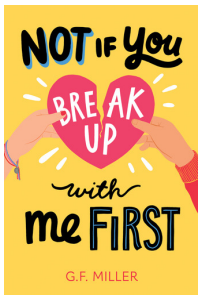

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About the Author

G.F. MILLER absolutely insists on a happy ending. Everything else is negotiable. She is living her Happily Ever After with the love of her life, three kids, two puppies, and some chickens. She cries at random times. She makes faces at herself in the mirror. She believes in the Oxford comma. And she's always here for a dance party. You can visit her at gfmiller.com.

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